RESTITUTION

BY

ANNE BEALE

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VOL. II.

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RESTITUTION

BY

ANNE BEALE

AUTHOR OF

'FAY ARLINGTON,' 'THE PENNANT FAMILY,'
'SQUIRE LISLE'S BEQUEST,' ETC.

'Fortune, men say, doth give too much to many;
But yet she never gave enough to any.'

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, LIMITED,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.
1889.

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THE SECOND VOLUME.

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RESTITUTION.

CHAPTER I.

MY 'DANCING-FROCK.'

The carriage from the Park was waiting at the little station at Roselands when the six o'clock train puffed up. Out stepped Mr. Aspenel as usual, followed by a tall, graceful girl, enveloped in a fur mantle, and crowned with a somewhat high black-velvet hat, in which was tastily placed a bunch of artificial roses. Out rushed from the pretty station-house a small figure, clad in dark-blue serge and round sailor

hat. The words 'Janet!' 'Edith!' passed, and the sisters embraced fervently; the younger and taller stooping over the elder and shorter. There was no time for further greeting, for Mr. Aspenel hurried them to the carriage, while the footman looked after the luggage. But, when in the brougham, Edith threw her arms round Janet, and literally wept for joy.

'Are they glad to have me?' asked Janet. 'Mr. Aspenel,—I mean, papa—I will try to call him so, darling—seemed pleased at first. Said I was grown, hoped I was improved, and assured me that my return is due to Mrs. Aspenel's intercession. What does he mean?'

'It does not matter; you are here, and we are all glad,' replied Edith. 'Why, there is Fan!'

And, assuredly, creeping stealthily round the carriage, and looking in at the window, was that erratic damsel.

'I just came to say how-d'ye-do, Miss

Janet. Shake hands, quick. Here's Mr. Aspenel.'

Janet stooped to kiss Fan's ice-cold cheek and to take the offered hand.

'I was watching for you at the station, but you were so grown I shouldn't have known you but for Miss Aspenel,' she continued, rapidly. 'You are handsomer than ever, and I daresay you are as accomplished and clever as—as—as Mr. Tom; but I hope you are nicer. Good-bye; good-night, Miss Aspenel.'

Fan vanished like a dark spirit, and was replaced by Mr. Aspenel, who had seen her.

'What can that gipsy girl of old Harton's want with you, Edith?' he said.

'She only came to welcome Janet home,' replied Edith, timidly, who had taken the seat with her back to the horses.

Mr. Aspenel and Janet were therefore side by side. He turned towards this distinguished-looking daughter, and said he

thought she had better give up her old acquaintances, and cultivate those she had made at school.

'The Somersets and Hazelmeres, for instance,' he added, and Janet wondered how he had learnt their names.

Edith told her afterwards that she used to read their father portions of her letters, and that these worthies always attracted his attention, and drew forth some remark.

When they reached home, they were met in the hall by Bruce and Nurse True. Heedless of spectators, Janet threw herself into the arms of the latter, and was received with the homely salutation of 'God be thanked, my lovey, we have you once more.' As to Bruce, he danced round her, screaming at the top of his shrill voice, 'Janet! Janet!' His arms encircled her neck, and nearly throttled her, and, when he released her, he shouted,

'Now we'll have some games. Come and play battledore and shuttlecock.'

'To-morrow,' replied Janet, hastening to the drawing-room, at Edith's instigation.

There Mrs. Aspenel was awaiting her in state. She was dressed for dinner, and Mr. Tom Harton was with her. Janet went to her impulsively, and embraced her.

'Thank you for letting me come home,' she said, when this little ceremony was over.

Mrs. Aspenel made an effort at cordiality, but her kiss and hand-shake were cold, and Janet's warmth was checked. Her stepmother looked at her amazed. She had sprung from the girl to the woman in those two years of absence, and it would have been impossible not to admire the beauty of face and elegance of figure developed during that period. She looked older than she was, and her manners were assured, so that Mrs. Aspenel felt almost patronised when she said, with the ease of a Frenchwoman,

'I am so happy to be at home again; but you would delight in Monsieur and Madame de Belleville, and they were so kind that it was not like a school.'

'You have forgotten me, Miss Janet,' came from behind her back.

'Mr. Tom!' she cried, turning to face the speaker, and holding out both hands.

He only took one, which he shook and pressed gently, and Janet was abashed at her impetuosity. She forgot that when she had last seen him she was a child of ten, and now she was grown up, or nearly so. But she soon recovered her natural manner, asked for his father, said she had seen Fan, and inquired after Jack. His replies were interrupted by Edith, who said she must come and dress for dinner.

Bruce was waiting for her in the hall. He eschewed the presence of his tutor whenever he could, and made up for school-room coercion by tormenting Edith and Nurse True. Now he had Janet, who had

'come home for the holidays,' and whom he expected to coerce in his turn, though he did not exactly employ that expression. She had made admirable resolutions both as regarded him and his mother, so she took his hand, and they danced together up the broad, richly-carpeted staircase, along the corridor of the old scenes, and into the nursery, now True's sitting-room.

'You dear old True. Let me hug you as I used,' cried Janet, becoming again the child, and literally 'hugging' first True, then Edith.

'Me too, Janet. I won't spoil your paintings,' said Bruce, ruefully.

And Janet caught his extended hands, and whirled him round the room in an ecstasy of pleasure.

'I never thought I should care for coming back to the Park!' she panted, when at last they came to a halt for very exhaustion.

'Home's home. No place like it,' ejaculated Nurse True, who was watching their gyrations with uplifted hands.

At last Edith succeeded in getting the wild girl into her bed-room. The sight of a blazing fire made her remember that it was cold, and that she had left hard frost without. Nurse True had unpacked one of her boxes in haste, and was there to help them, having told Edith's maid that she 'would wait on the young ladies this first evening.' Bruce was outside drumming at the door.

'We must be to the moment, darling; papa is very particular,' said Edith, whose simple blue dress was soon on, and her fair hair arranged.

'This is my "dancing-frock,"' laughed Janet. 'It is *en demie toilette*, but I used to wear it in Paris, at evening receptions. Mrs. Aspenel was dressed like a queen. Is papa really ruined?'

'I cannot make out,' replied Edith,

watching Janet while the dancing-frock was put on.

It was of white cashmere, high to the throat, and relieved by crimson ribbons.

'How well you look! Crimson is your colour,' said Edith, enthusiastically.

'So says Maximilien,' returned Janet, nonchalantly.

'Bless you, my dearies,' said Nurse True. 'Don't set your heart on dress and they sort of vanities. "Handsome is that handsome does."'

'You have not forgotten your proverbs, you dear old True,' said Janet, looking at herself in the cheval-glass. 'I wish madame were here to give me the finishing touch. First impressions are everything. What do you think of me, Bruce?'

Edith had opened the door, and that youth rushed in.

'You are beautiful. Prettier than Edith or mamma. I'm coming down to dessert, and shall see you again.'

The dinner-bell rang, and the sisters walked down the corridor hand in hand; the white, fairy-like, childish Edith, and the rose-tinted, symmetrical, womanly Janet.

'Is Tom Harton as clever and agreeable as he used to be?' asked Janet.

'I cannot tell; I do not understand him,' replied her sister.

When they reached the drawing-room, Edith pushed Janet in before her. The little tussle between them at the door was unperceived by the trio within, and the entrance of Janet first probably unnoticed; but it was impossible not to remark upon her appearance, as she eclipsed her sister on the threshold. Even her father gazed at her, and was astonished at the change in the girl who left that house, angular and somewhat awkward, about two years before, and returned to it in all the radiant beauty and unconscious grace of budding womanhood.

'She certainly is grown,' remarked Mr. Aspenel, as if taking up the thread of something that had been spoken before the girls came in.

Dinner was announced, and, to the surprise of Janet, her father offered his arm to her, saying, with a sort of jerky courtesy, 'You are the greatest stranger.' Edith, nothing loth, fell behind, while Tom Harton and Mrs. Aspenel followed silently remarking on Janet. Edith was, however, placed next Tom Harton at table, while Janet sat alone on the opposite side. Mrs. Aspenel and Tom usually kept up the conversational ball, but to-day Mr. Aspenel joined. It seemed as if he were resolved to make himself agreeable to this daughter whom he sent off almost in disgrace. She was not shy, and answered all his questions briskly, to the amazement of Edith, who, though not absolutely afraid of him, never felt quite at her ease with him. By degrees the quintette were all engrossed

with Janet's experiences at school and in Paris, and the vivacious girl replied to the questions of her elders with a piquancy at once fresh and entertaining. Mrs. Aspenel had never seen her husband so pleasant before, and Edith looked astonished at Janet, who thus managed to engross the attention of one always absorbed in his various speculations. As to Tom Harton, who was a student of character, as well as a tactitian, he glanced from father to daughter, and wondered where lay the fascination. 'Beauty and originality,' he said to himself, and with customary diplomacy avoided taking the lead as he did when there was no Janet. But he managed, nevertheless, to rivet her attention from time to time. She was thinking of the days when she used to escape from the Park to romp with Mr. Harton, Tom, Jack, and Fan, and wondering whether the Tom whom she then looked upon as a sort of oracle and divinity were exactly the same,

or whether college and travel had put another Tom into his handsome tabernacle during the six years that had passed since she had seen him.

'If only papa could always be like this,' reflected Edith, who was quite willing to suffer eclipse through the intervention of her younger sister.

Even Bruce stole from his mother's side to Janet's when he appeared at dessert, and not even the all-conquering eyes of his tutor could stay his demands on the attention of this formerly distasteful half-sister.

When the three ladies were alone for a short space after the dinner was over, Mrs. Aspenel began a kind of inquisition. But Janet replied so frankly to all her enquiries that she could find no fault with her. Still it was difficult to kindle affection where dislike had always dwelt, and two years of separation were not likely to effect this. But Janet had made up her mind

to begin well, and she certainly sought to carry out her good intention.

'Would Miss Hazelmere like to come here, Janet?' asked Mrs. Aspenel.

'I am sure she would. She quite longs to see Edith—and you,' replied Janet, first enthusiastically, then reflectively.

'See me! I am of secondary importance.'

'It is so kind of you to think of Lizzie, and to have me home. Oh! Mrs. Aspenel, I will really try to be less—less—what shall I say, Edith? less aggressive. I daresay it was all my fault that I was sent to school for two years, and they have been quite the happiest years of my life, and I thank you for them.'

Janet intended to atone and apologise for the past by this doubtful speech, but Edith saw at once that Mrs. Aspenel was offended. She was quick to take offence, and would not believe that these, her step-

daughters, had any wish to conciliate her. Fortunately the arrival of Tom Harton turned the current of her displeasure, and the inevitable classical music put an end to conversation. Mr. Aspenel did not appear again.

'You are improved, Edith. Is that due to the drooping Lilyton?' asked Janet, when there was a pause after a Mendelssohnian trio.

'You sing and play of course, Miss Janet?' suggested Harton, fixing his dark, enigmatical eyes upon her.

'Very badly. I am not musical. Madame calls my singing execrable, though I can sing French songs with her and monsieur.'

'And the Maximilien? Does he sing?'

'No. We both paint. He is a genius.'

'Why was she so communicative?' thought poor Edith, who was intent on everything her sister did and said.

In truth, Janet had been carried away by

the interest she excited, and had talked of Maximilien and Wilbraham as openly as she had of their parents. At sixteen, happily, we are not over-cautious, and she was especially transparent. It was probably this which had won her very opaque father; since people like their opposites. Both Mrs. Aspenel and Tom asked for one of these French songs, but she steadily refused to sing, assuring them that they were *chants de province*, in the provincial dialect, and that she could not attempt them without madame and monsieur.

'I wish you could hear monsieur. He would make you die of laughing. And he sometimes sings us a song that makes us all yawn,' she said, exploding in the most cheerful of cacchinations at the recollection. 'But we have no voices like Mrs. Aspenel's,' she continued, with a sort of intuitive tact, for she could not help perceiving that her step-mother liked to be first in the estimation of Tom Harton.

'Few people sing like Mrs. Aspenel,' said Tom. 'She surpasses all the amateurs, and most of the professionals—if, indeed it be not a distinction without a difference to separate the two classes. Nowadays all amateurs are virtually professionals, and are not above taking money for their performances, whether literary, musical, theatrical, or artistic.'

'That is what madame says,' cried Janet, as if she had clinched the argument at once. 'Do you ever sing in public, Mr. Tom?'

He laughed, and replied that he had occasionally taken part in amateur concerts, but had never usurped the professional place. Mrs. Aspenel said he might easily do so if he liked; and, with a little more similar talk of no moment to anyone, the evening ended and Mr. Tom departed.

CHAPTER II.

OLD FRIENDS.

Christmas was always a time of great trial to Mr. Aspenel. He disliked Christmas bills and Christmas charities, and, though he felt obliged by his position to pay heed to both, he did so with grudging heart and hand. But when it came to gaieties he was utterly overdone. Mrs. Aspenel had been long working towards an entertainment of some sort that should announce to the world that Edith was duly introduced into society; but her husband objected to the expense, and utilized the well-worn excuse of the lost ship as a plea for retrenchment instead of enlargement of

domestic liabilities. Her amazement was therefore great when, the day after Janet's return, he volunteered his assent to the holding of some sort of Christmas festivity.

'A dinner and a dance afterwards,' he suggested.

'That will do splendidly,' replied his astonished wife. 'We can invite the Beechtons and others, to whom we owe a return, to dinner, and the immediate neighbours and your town friends to the dance. You must give me a list.'

'Oh! we don't want a multitude. I can't afford that; but really Janet is so handsome that she may make a grand match.'

The murder was out, but Mrs. Aspenel was discreet enough not to pry into details. She merely suggested that Janet was not yet old enough to be regularly introduced, though Edith was.

'Janet is older than Edith in person, if not in years,' he replied, irritably. 'She

is uncommonly good-looking and agreeable. She might be twenty, and one show will save trouble and expense. Introduce them both at the same time, and the thing will be over. It is like two marriages on the same day; one fuss and folly does for both.'

'Then we had better invite everyone we know, good, bad, and indifferent,' suggested his wife.

'Perhaps so, not forgetting the "old ladies,"' he replied, with a grim effort at gaiety.

No sooner said than done. Mrs. Aspenel set to work at once to make out lists, and arrange for a real festivity. Edith was alarmed, Janet in ecstacies, Bruce obstreperous, but the quartette were united for once in a desire to bring about a success.

'Let us have it on Twelfth Night, the old *jour de l'an*,' cried Janet, who became more at her ease with her step-mother as the delightful prospect expanded.

But Mrs. Aspenel did not intend to delegate any of her authority to the girls, albeit she allowed the proposed Twelfth Night to be the period fixed on. She had a genius for organisation, and it cost her no trouble to make all necessary arrangements. Fortunately Mr. Aspenel was away all day, and she took care that none of her preparations should be visible to him when he was at home; indeed, he had soon forgotten his unguarded concession altogether. She took *carte blanche* as regarded expense, and proceeded with a high and lavish hand. She had grown reckless under perpetual restraint, and, breaking loose for once, determined to 'go the pace,' as the language of slang hath it. Edith did her best to warn her, indirectly, of consequences, while Janet and Bruce rejoiced in the unusual stir. It was holiday time for both, and wheresoever Janet went, Bruce followed, much to the girl's annoyance; but she had made up her mind

to conciliate both him and his mother, so she alternately romped and roved with him, much to his delight.

Mrs. Aspenel, also, was doing her best to avoid collision with Janet. She had heard from various side-winds that appearances were against her, in Janet's long absence, and this had caused her request for a recall. Mr. Aspenel had consented upon plea that there should 'be no more rows;' but she had not contemplated the effect on him and others of her step-daughter's looks and manners. She was rather jealous than unkind, and disliked a rival, while she desired peace at any cost. However, she did not attempt to put any restraint on Janet's movements, whose happiness at seeing her old friends again was so intense that she was out and about so long as the short day-light permitted; sometimes with Edith, Nurse True, or Bruce; often alone.

Her first visit was to her aunt, Mrs.

Clarville, and the other inmates of the Cottages. Edith and Bruce were with her. It was a bright, clear, frosty day, and as they ran through the park, over the rime-clad drive and grass, and beneath the trees bare of leaves but studded with diamonds, their feet seemed to tread the air rather than the earth. Bruce insisted on a hand of each of his step-sisters, and his shouts and their laughter preceded them as they neared the Cottages. Edith and her instructresses had also their Christmas holiday, and made their little jokes concerning it.

'Here you are still, Miranda,' shouted Janet, bursting into Mrs. Clarville's neat kitchen, where that handmaiden was on her knees, scrubbing the floor. 'You are grown!'

'So be you, miss. My! How beautiful you do look,' said Miranda, jumping up, and nearly upsetting her pail.

'Roses always do look smart in winter,'

responded Janet, extending her hand, while Miranda carefully wiped hers in her apron, curtseyed, and took it. 'Where's auntie?'

'I think she be along with poor Mrs. Lorne. The old lady be on her last legs now, Miss Janet.'

'Then Rebecca Sure will marry at last,' said Janet.

Mrs. Clarville returned at the moment, and the greeting between aunt and niece was very warm. Although Mrs. Clarville did not express her admiration at Janet's appearance as frankly as did Miranda, she was yet struck by it; indeed, Janet's vanity was sufficiently stirred during her royal progress from house to house to satisfy any girl. Not that she was naturally vain, but she was human, and the incautious remarks of friends often rouse feelings not easily put to sleep again. 'Strike the match, and flame follows.'

While Janet remained with Mrs. Clar-

ville, Edith went to ask for Miss Lorne, and Bruce accompanied her.

'What is Gerard doing, auntie? He is almost the only person Edith has not told me about,' began Janet, when she was seated in her aunt's cosy parlour.

'Working as hard as ever, dear, body and mind, but making no advance in the way of income. Lady Ascham has taken him up; by that I mean she has added to his work, and won't let him alone.'

'Perhaps she will make his fortune by-and-by,' said the enthusiastic Janet. 'He is sure to succeed, you know, because good people always do in the end.'

Mrs. Clarville smiled and shook her head. She had, however, plenty to do in replying to Janet's questions, who heard some interesting details of people she inquired about. The other ladies were dying to see her, so she did not remain long at No 1, but rushed off to the other five small abodes. She found all their

inmates indoors, except Miss Vigors, who, both mentally and corporeally, was strong, and was never kept at home by weather, however cold. And that Christmas had come in with a will was apparent in the flocks of birds, large and small, that were fluttering about the Cottages.

Janet startled a crowd of robins, thrushes, and sparrows that were assembled under the verandah, picking up the crumbs strewn from one end to the other; while she noticed that on the lawn, blackbirds, starlings, and rooks were disputing over crusts and even grain, scattered here and there on the frost-bound grass.

'Oh! my dear, they would starve but for us!' said Miss Short, who was watching them from her window, when Janet entered. 'You are like Mr. Gerard, my dear! I can't pay you a greater compliment,' said the old lady, examining her through her spectacles.

'Impossible. I would rather be like

Cousin Gerard than anyone in the world,' returned Janet. 'And you used to say my mother was like him and Aunt Clarville. So I must be a Gerard and not an Aspenel. I am so glad.'

'My dear!' ejaculated Miss Short, reprovingly; but Janet stayed to hear no more.

She found Bruce with Miss Lilyton, to whom he had taken a fancy. He did not like Mrs. Clarville.

'We are all glad to see you again, I am sure, Miss Janet,' said Miss Lilyton. 'I hope you have made as great progress in your studies as dear Miss Aspenel. She has been a sunbeam in our path ever since Mr. Aspenel allowed her to come to us. I hope he is satisfied with her. You are doubtless much more accomplished. You are——, but I must not flatter you.'

'Papa says she is uncommonly handsome; I heard him. But mamma doesn't think so,' interrupted Bruce.

Miss Lilyton coughed, and Janet seized Bruce by the arm, and bade him hold his tongue.

A peep at Mrs. Lucy sufficed, and then Janet and Bruce awaited Edith in Miss Lorne's silent parlour. There was no fire, and the cold and stillness were oppressive. They crept out and listened at the bedroom door. They heard Edith's voice. She was reading a prayer, to which the faithful Rebecca said 'Amen.'

'I don't like it. Let's come away,' said Bruce; and Janet felt awestruck at finding herself so near the 'valley and shadow of death.'

The door opened and Edith appeared. She looked even whiter than usual, and had tears in her eyes. Rebecca came out for a moment, and spoke to Janet, whose question respecting 'the faithful blacksmith' died away on her lips.

'She has long been ready to go, miss,'

whispered the old servant, stealing back to her mistress's room.

From the Cottages the trio proceeded to the Rectory, which we have not yet visited. It was a pretty, picturesque house, not far from the church. They found Mr. Austen at home. He was a good and kindly man, and fond of young people, which resulted in young people being fond of him. Gerard and he were great allies, and might even be called confidential friends, for each submitted to the other such events as befel him.

'What has become of the gipsies, Mr. Austen?' asked Janet, when greetings were over. 'Edith gave me part of their history.'

Mr. Austen glanced at Bruce, and answered, discreetly,

'They have gone into winter quarters. The children came regularly to school, thanks to Fan, till they all decamped;

and the Tigress has, I hear, given up fortune-telling, thanks to Gerard. I think and hope we were of some service to them.'

'Did Fan continue the lollipops?' asked Janet.

'If so, she did not confide in me,' replied Mr. Austen, with a sly twinkle in his eye.

'Let us go and ask her,' said Janet, rising.

'I won't go to Hoplands,' declared Bruce, with decision.

'Afraid of the cane, Bruce?' asked the rector, and the boy nodded.

So Edith and Bruce left Janet at the garden-gate, and returned to the Park. Janet met Fan and her dogs at the door. Forgetful of all distinctions, whether of caste or propriety, Fan gave Janet the heartiest hug she had experienced since her return.

'You have grown a beauty, Miss Janet. I used to envy Miss Aspenel, but you are

grander than she. Come and see Sir: come quick, before Tom makes his appearance. Oh! Miss Janet, I can't live with Tom.'

'Not live with Tom!' repeated Janet, following to the dining-room, where Mr. Harton was surrounded, as usual, by his books.

His polite greeting distressed and offended Janet. She forgot that she was now a grown-up young lady, and that he was a proud man, not on the best of terms with her father. There ensued unusual restraint.

'What is the matter, Sir? Aren't you glad to see Miss Janet? Hasn't she grown into a beautiful young lady?' said Fan, who had herself developed into something between a Spaniard and Asiatic.

'Very. But I may as well tell her at once that possibly Mr. Aspenel may not wish her to come here.'

This was Janet's first rebuff. She had

a spirit of her own, and drew herself up accordingly. 'Why, Mr. Harton?' she asked.

'Because your father and I have split on most points, and scarcely speak when we meet. Gipsies, rents, tithes, charities come between us. He never visits me nor I him. Although we are neighbours, we are not friends. He suspects and dislikes Fan, and would be annoyed at your familiarity with her. Miss Aspenel is as wise as she is good, and does not come here; perhaps you had better follow her example, Miss Janet.'

'But Mr. Tom comes to the Park, Mr. Harton!' said Janet, indignantly.

'Tom does what he likes. He is independent of me, and he is your brother's tutor,' was the dry answer.

'Tom makes everybody like him, except me and all the servants,' put in Fan. 'We can't bear him, and wish he would go away again.'

'You are very complimentary. I hope Miss Janet Aspenel will pronounce a more favourable opinion,' said some one from the doorway; and, to the general confusion, Tom Harton came in.

'Listeners never hear any good of themselves,' cried Fan, running off with a defiant look at him, and a nod to Janet.

'What have you done to Fan, Tom?' asked Mr. Harton.

'Nothing, but reprove her for her wandering habits; but gipsy blood circulates rapidly, and I suppose she can't help them.'

Janet began to feel awkward, and to realise that perhaps she ought not to be making a call on Mr. Harton and his agreeable, handsome son; so she rose to go. Mr. Harton's stiff manner relaxed, and he begged her to forgive an old man for speaking plainly. But her pride was roused, and her farewell commensurately cold. She walked out of the room erect and magnificent. Mr. Tom accompanied

her to the gate, and seemed about to go further, but she wished him good-morning with an air so determined that he changed his mind.

'She knows what she's about, if Miss Aspenel doesn't,' he muttered, as he watched her disappear at the turning of the road.

CHAPTER III.

FAN IN TROUBLE.

'I MUST speak to you, Miss Janet. No one will see us here,' greeted Janet, when she reached the side gate leading to the Park, through which she had always been in the habit of escaping to Hoplands.

It was Fan, who was crouching within the shadow of the park wall, concealed by trees and bracken. Janet paused. She had been walking so rapidly that she was out of breath, and was not sorry to be arrested by Fan.

'He is not coming! Did you leave him at home?' began Fan.

'Yes, if you mean Mr. Tom,' replied Janet.

'He is a snake in the grass. Don't trust him, Miss Janet. You used to love him as I loved Jack; but, oh! they are as different as—Mr. Aspenel and Sir. I can't live with him any longer; indeed I can't. He hates me and twits me for my gipsy origin, and tries to run down the gipsies. Ha! ha! Sir and Mr. Gerard and I circumvented him and Mr. Aspenel, and they stopped on the common as long as they liked. Sir paid the children's schooling and I gave them lollipops on the sly. They were just as nice children as the villagers, and sharper. I taught them on Sundays, and Miss Aspenel took my class. Mr. Gerard went to see them, and preached, so that some of them became Christians; indeed they did. Tom scoffs, and even Sir laughs, but it's quite true. Mrs. Lee, the old Tigress, has bought a basket of cottons and tape and needles and all sorts of things,

and goes about selling them. She says, "Nothing's too hard for the Lord," and nothing is, Miss Janet, except Mr. Tom. Don't believe anything he says, and don't let Miss Aspenel believe him. Hush! I hope the dogs haven't got loose.'

Fan paused to peep round the wall, but no one was near. Janet begged her to make haste.

'I can't, Miss Janet, for so much depends on you and Miss Aspenel being on your guard. He is what Miss Vigors calls diplomatic. Poor Miss Vigors! she has worked very hard with me, to no purpose: but Miss Aspenel is "a credit to her," as she says.' Fan laughed. 'Miss Aspenel is an angel, but you are more like me. I mean, you are not as bad as me, of course, but you are not quite perfect, are you?'

'My dear Fan, I am not nearly as good as you, for you love your foster-father better than I do my real one, and teach in the Sunday-school, and——'

'Miss Janet, I am very bad indeed, but I love Sir and Jack as dearly as my life.'

Here Fan broke out into a sort of sobbing wail which terrified Janet.

'Oh, Miss Janet, I can't help it, and Tom is sure to be somewhere listening,' said Fan, making an effort to calm herself. 'Tell Sir how dearly I love him and Jack, and don't be offended with him because he spoke out just now. He is very fond of you. He loves you next to me, but—I think—he loves me best.'

Here the sobs broke out again, and Fan could not control them. Janet tried to soothe her, argued with her that Tom did not mean to be unkind, assured her that she was her friend, and that Edith was fond of her, and that Mrs. Clarville and Gerard and all the ladies cared for her.

'As to the poor and the gipsies, they adore you, Fan,' she wound up with.

It was all in vain. The sobs increased, and Fan suddenly threw her arms round

Janet, clung to her for a moment, then darted across the park in the direction of the Home Farm.

We must leave Janet to follow her.

The Home Farm was a pleasant, shady place, situated in the park at some distance from the great house. It had its model farmyard, model dairy, and, one may almost say, model cows, for people always go in for the models. Mr. Aspenel did, and his children were especially fond of a model dairymaid, who gave them fresh milk and curds-and-whey whenever they liked. Mr. Aspenel himself only visited these, his models, on Sunday afternoon, when, having been to church in the morning, he found as many flaws in them and their expenditure as he possibly could. Hither came Fan. She, too, was fond of the dairymaid, whom she had once known at Hoplands, and who always received her with delight.

'My dear Fan, what is the matter?'

asked this official, who was in her ornamental dairy, skimming the last settlement of cream from the milk in a white, china milk-dish, for Mr. Aspenel sold the skim-milk to the poor, and allowed no cream to circulate therewith.

'Mary, have you seen Mrs. Lee?' panted Fan.

'What! the old Tigress that have been converted, and goes about with a basket? She was here half-an-hour agone, and is coming back this way. She said she was going on to the house, for the servants have took to deal with her, and she sells 'em tracks instead of telling their fortunes. Many's a time she've told mine, and a lot o' things she said come true. But she have give it all up for "the Lord's sake," she says.'

'So she has,' said Fan, solemnly, recovering voice and manner. 'She used to get as much as a guinea from ladies on the sly. She understands astrology and palm-

istry, and lots of clever things. May I stay here till she comes back?'

'To be sure you may,' assented Mary, proceeding with her work.

Fan had not long to wait. Standing watching on the threshold of the dairy, which looked like a temple, she made a pretty picture. The scarlet feather in her hat, and the scarlet scarf twisted round her neck, contrasted with the black hair; while the hoar-frost on trees and roofs, and the cold, clear winter sky surrounded her. Toiling up a slippery slope appeared a neatly-dressed old woman. She wore bonnet, apron, and dark plaid shawl, and was very unlike the Tigress. Yet she it was. She carried a large basket full of such wares as itinerants hawk about, and looked eminently respectable. Fan hastened to meet her, and insisted on taking her basket from her, and resting it on the doorstep of the dairy.

The dairymaid overhauled the goods,

and found that she wanted certain reels of cotton and tapes; and, meanwhile, Mrs. Lee went inside and rested.

'Buy a track as well, Mary. Here's one as is very comforting,' spoke the old Tigress. 'One as can read spelt it out to me. But I'm beginning to learn to read myself. There's nothing too hard for the Lord, and, under Him, Mrs. Clarville and her son have conwerted me. I told the girls so at the Park, but they laughed. "Tell us our fortunes," they said, but I've done with that trade, and said so. They were so surprised that they bought some tracks, and wouldn't believe that they wasn't about fortune-telling. If they was, I should soon have their master down upon me, and be shut up or fined. I've told lies enough in my time; now I'm going to tell the truth, and spread the Gospel news so long as I'm alive. And I'm taking this round out of gratitude to Mr. Harton and Mr. Austen, who gave us

room to pitch our tents, and let the children have some larning, God bless 'em!'

Mary stood listening, arms akimbo and open-mouthed, for she had known the Tigress for years. Fan also listened. The afternoon sun looked in upon the trio through the sparkling trees, the icicles on which he was transmuting to gems; and seemed to be listening also.

'Accept salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved,' burst forth the old woman, rising and outstretching her hand. 'There's nothing to do, nothing to pay; it's all without money and without price.'

Then she took a paper from her basket, and presented it solemnly to Fan, saying,

'I promised to deliver it myself. Do your duty, child. I don't know what's wrote within, but, as sure as that sun is shining, and Mary's my witness, every word I've ever said to you is true as this Holy Gospel.'

She took from her basket a small book, which contained 'The Gospel according to St. John.'

'You can read, and I'll give it to you,' she added, placing the booklet in Fan's gloveless palm. 'The Lord forgive me, but I was just going to say, "Cross my hand, and I'll tell your fortune," for the lines are as clear as the light, as I read them there, beneath the Truth, in your small hand. If I could read that blessed Word as well as I can read those lines, I should be a happy woman this day. But I'm forgiven! I'm forgiven! Washed in the blood of the Lamb.'

'What ought I to do? What must I do?' cried Fan, who was trembling with a sort of fear.

'Repent and be converted; then the Lord will make straight your path,' replied Mrs. Lee. 'Come not with me, child. Stay here till I am out of sight.'

She took up her basket, and hastened

away in the direction of one of the lodges. Fan watched her till she was out of sight, while the astonished dairymaid poured forth many questions as to whether 'the Tigress was really converted, or was she acting a part? Was it because she would be took up for fortune-telling, and wouldn't for hawking, if she paid her five shillings a-year reg'lar for her licence?' etc.

'She is converted, Mary,' replied Fan, emphasising every word.

'I wouldn't have nothing to do with her, any the more for that, if I was you, Fan,' said Mary, bustling over the white-china milk-pans.

Fan put the paper carefully in her pocket, and returned across the park to Hoplands.

'I won't read it till I'm locked into my room, or Tom will be sure to see me,' she muttered, as her winged feet trod the frosty rime.

This dreaded Tom was watching for her

near the kennel where she had shut up the barking, yelping, impatient dogs. He knew that she would let them loose, and was pacing the yard expectant. She did, in fact, go there first, and opened the kennel without perceiving the enemy. She was startled by his approach, and the severely-spoken words,

'Fan, I wish to speak to you.'

'Certainly, Mr. Tom,' she answered, defiantly.

'Come into my study. We shall not be interrupted there.'

They went by the back entrance into the room appropriated to Tom. It looked out at the side of the house upon a portion of the copse, through which he had watched the disappearance of Wandering Will. His studentship was apparent in the bookshelves and scattered volumes and papers that filled the room.

'Sit down, Fan.'

'With pleasure Mr. Tom. How quiet your room is.'

'May I ask, Fan, what you meant by speaking of me as you did to Miss Janet Aspenel.'

'I only said that the servants and I wish you would go away again, and so we do.'

'Why?'

'Because you go contrary to us, Mr. Tom. You know you can't bear me, and want to get rid of me. But Sir doesn't.'

'Then our feelings are reciprocal, Fan. You say you can't bear me, and I can't bear you. These are your words, and, as you are no longer an inconsequent child, I suppose they mean something.'

'I don't know what you mean, Mr. Tom. What's "inconsequent?"'

'Well, you understand the consequences that must follow on certain premises.'

'Indeed I do not. I only understand that you and I don't get on together, and

if this is the consequence of my being a born gipsy, as you are always saying, I don't know how to alter it.'

'By staying indoors, and not wandering all over the country at unseemly hours; by avoiding contact with your clansmen and women; by not bribing gipsy-children to go to school, and so keeping a set of vagabonds in this neighbourhood; by not running after people above your own rank; and, finally, by avoiding all allusion to me.'

'Then I must put chains on my feet and hands and tongue. I could never do that, Mr. Tom.'

Fan laughed, and displayed two rows of ivory so small and white, set in such a coral box, that even Tom was fain to admire them; to say nothing of the sparkling eyes and red-rose cheeks. He was the only man who could resist Fan's fascinations.

'You harbour all sorts of vagrants either in the kitchen or woods. Twice I have

seen a suspicious character lurking about, once in your presence, once, I believe, waiting for you. You are often in company with that old humbug, the Tigress. You resist Miss Vigors' efforts for your good; even my father and Mr. Austen—'

'Stop, stop, Mr. Tom,' shouted Fan, putting her fingers in her ears. 'I won't listen to a word more, for you are beginning to tell lies. Neither Sir nor Mr. Austen ever said a word against me. The Tigress is not a humbug, but a Christian woman who has given up making lots of money upon principle, and become a respectable hawker. You may laugh, Mr. Tom; but she's converted, and Mrs. Clarville has done it, as sure as Fan's Fan. I wonder whether you would give up the hope of a grand match and a grand fortune to go a-hawking.'

Tom's face darkened, as he replied,

'Not the Tigress's kind of hawking, certainly. But, what is more to the purpose,

will you give up your haunts and associates and do your duty to my father, who has done so much for you?'

'I would do anything in the world for him, and you know it, Mr. Tom. Oh, how I wish Jack were here!'

The recollection of Jack was the last strain on Fan's overwrought feelings. She broke into passionate, almost hysterical sobs. Tom had never seen her so affected since his mother's funeral, when the women-servants were obliged to withdraw her from the grave. Being human, he was himself touched.

'I did not mean to pain you so much, only to advise you, Fan,' he said.

'I don't care what you meant. You are cold and cruel,' she cried, restraining her sobs, and moving towards the door. 'But you shall not reproach me any more. Everybody in this house has been kind to me but you. I love Sir, and Jack dearly —dearly. Oh, if Jack were here! And

mother! I love her still with all my heart. But you! you, Mr. Tom! No: I won't hate you, for that's wicked, but I—I —never want to see you again as long as I live.'

She opened the door, banged it after her, and left Tom Harton in a state of some uncertainty.

'I did not mean to raise such a whirlwind,' he muttered; 'but I think she will not again prejudice the Miss Aspenels against me. She is so shrewd, that one knows not where she may stop.'

He sat down, took up a book, and began his studies.

CHAPTER IV.

NO FAN.

The next morning there was great consternation at Hoplands, for Fan was missing. She did not appear as usual at breakfast, and even Tom was obliged to acknowledge that everything looked disconsolate without her. The kettle did not sing, the tea was unmade, the toast was cold, the bacon greasy, the eggs unboiled. As a rule, Fan saw to all this, and saw to it with seeing eyes. It was a bitterly cold morning, and frost had glazed all the window-panes and half-congealed the blood in Tom's veins, as he rubbed his hands over

the smoky fire. There were no dogs on the hearthrug, and no sound anywhere.

'These are her gipsy ways. She is revenging herself on me,' muttered Tom. 'She is mistaken if she thinks she will have any effect. I can wait.'

He took up a newspaper and pretended to read.

'Where's Fan? Bless me, something must have happened. Breakfast isn't ready, and the room's like an ice-house. Fan! Fan!' cried Mr. Harton, coming in.

The latter words were shouted in the hall, from the bottom of the staircase. No answer. He rang the bell.

'Where's Fan?' he asked of the servant.

'I thought she was here, sir. I'll go and see.'

The girl went, and returned immediately.

'She must have gone for a walk, sir; for she've took her hat and cloak. She's sure to be back directly. I lays the break-

fast and never waits for her, for she's always to the minute.'

'She is,' assented Mr. Harton, while the servant drew up the fire, boiled the kettle, and did all she could to compensate for Fan's non-appearance.

Tom sat over his paper, silent and relentless; while his father tried to look through the frosted panes, walked to the hall-door, shouted 'Fan,' and finally sat down at the breakfast-table.

'She must be mad to go out before breakfast on such a morning as this,' he said.

'She is mad,' replied Tom. 'But she is only revenging herself on me for lecturing her on her improper conduct. She will be here when she has paid me off.'

'She has paid us both off, and that's hard upon me who have no account against her,' said Mr. Harton. 'What did you find amiss in her?'

'Principally what she said about me to

Miss Janet Aspenel; but also her assignations with improper characters.'

'Pshaw, Tom! There's no harm in anything the poor child does. She likes liberty, that's all.'

'Just so, father. Liberty of tongue as well as action. It is time some of it should be put a stop to.'

Mr. Harton was an easy-going man, and never argued with Tom if he could help it; so he began his breakfast, grumbling over weak tea, hard-boiled eggs, and cold bacon and toast. He was up and down twenty times during the meal, looking for Fan.

'She's paying you off with a vengeance,' he said. 'She'll take her death of cold. Send one of the men to look for Fan,' he added to the maid, who came in with a relay of steaming rashers.

Tom began upon them, assuring his father that Fan never took cold.

Back came the maid with the words, 'Sam has gone off to look for her, and

has taken Rolf. He'll find her quick enough.'

But neither Sam nor Rolf could meet with Fan, so Mr. Harton went off in search himself, and Tom, who was alarmed at her continued absence, on account of the conversation of the previous evening, turned out also.

Mr. Harton went first to the Cottages, thence to the Rectory, and finally through the village, but nobody had seen Fan. The old ladies, the rector, and the villagers agreed in assuring him that she would 'turn up all right,' as they had each met her in various out-of-the-way places at all sorts of hours.

'Not before breakfast in mid-winter,' said Mr. Harton.

There was a hue-and-cry after Fan, who was everybody's friend and favourite, despite her odd ways. The only person who gathered certain news of her was Tom. He inquired at the west lodge of the Park,

and heard that she had been seen at the dairy the previous afternoon. He readily elicited from Mary the dairymaid what had passed in her presence between the Tigress and Fan, and returned with the news, elated, to his father. But Mary had not seen the transmission of the letter.

'She is only playing us a trick, and has gone off with that old humbug for one of her gipsy excursions,' he said, reassured himself, and feeling convinced that he, at least, had nothing to do with her escapade. His father, on the contrary, laid the blame at his door.

It was strange that nothing was disarranged in Fan's room. She had slept in her bed, and dressed herself in her ordinary clothes. Mr. Harton was comforted when he learnt that the latter were the warmest she possessed, and mostly of woollen. She always wore the thickest of country-made boots in winter, and hose knitted by some

poor villager, so she was proof against the frosted roads.

'She could not mean to stop out the night, or she would have taken a night-dress,' suggested a maid.

'Of course not. I never supposed her absence was intentional,' said irrational Mr. Harton.

'Then why did she leave before breakfast?' asked irritating Tom. 'Depend on it she had an assignation with that fellow who was hanging about here.'

The day wore on, and still no Fan. The news reached the Park through the dairy-maid, and the servants told Nurse True, who naturally passed it on to her young ladies. In spite of her resolutions of the previous day, impulsive Janet appeared at Hoplands during the afternoon. She met Mr. Harton in the lane, walking up and down in a state of great anxiety.

'Is it true about Fan, Mr. Harton?' she asked.

'She has not come back, Miss Janet,' he replied.

'I daresay she will by-and-by,' returned Janet. 'I think she was frightened because she was overheard by Mr. Tom when she made that speech to me about him. She ran after me, and seemed very strange. She cried and sobbed, and said she loved you and Jack as dearly as her life. She is afraid of Mr. Tom.'

'He is the only one who hasn't spoilt her,' said Mr. Harton, with a latent sense of justice. 'It was impossible to control Fan, and now I don't know what may have become of her. But I don't think Mrs. Lee would lead her into harm. Whether she's converted or not, she's honest. I've known her off and on ever since I was a young man, and during my father's time and mine she and the gipsies never stole a chick from us, or rifled a hedge. We've always harboured 'em.'

'She was at the Park yesterday, and

the servants bought cottons and tracts of her. Nurse True believes that she is really converted,' said Janet.

Mr. Harton smiled, and said,

'If so, Gerard Clarville must be a Salvationist.'

Almost as he spoke, Mrs. Clarville appeared. She had also come to inquire about Fan. She was surprised to see Janet alone, and, when she had learnt that Fan was still absent, said she would walk with her to the Park. She declined Mr. Harton's invitation to the house, thinking that Janet's independent rambles were almost as doubtful as Fan's. They walked away together, and were succeeded by a crowd of eager inquirers, who, however, all believed that Fan would be home before nightfall. Among them was Miss Vigors.

'Fan may be wild and unteachable, but a more obedient and tractable girl never lived,' she said, and went with Mr. Harton into the house.

She was more strong-minded than Mrs. Clarville, and volunteered to make tea for him and Mr. Tom. She contrived to divert his mind by leading him to talk on his favourite subjects, and remained with him so long that the domestics thought she would never depart. The pair were *tête-à-tête*, since Tom did not come in to tea. Mild Mr. Harton, and Miss Vigors laying down the law in a big bonnet and a large scarlet cross-over—she had thrown off her cloak—was a sight that would have delighted Fan. But Fan did not return to see it.

'Thank you heartily for your visit, Miss Vigors,' said Mr. Harton, when propriety obliged her to rise. 'Sam shall see you home.'

'I shan't have a wink of sleep to-night,' she said. 'But Fan is sure to come back sooner or later.'

But Fan did not come back. Mr. Tom did, however, and brought the news that

Fan had been seen at the railway-station nigh to Roselands about nine o'clock that morning. This was five miles from Hoplands, and Mr. Harton said she had boasted that she could walk it in a little more than an hour.

'She has gone off to vex me, intending to return, and has missed the train,' suggested Tom, who felt sadly uncomfortable.

'At any rate, she hasn't destroyed herself in a fit of anger or perplexity,' returned his father. 'I daresay she will be at home to-morrow. Your lecture did for her, and your long absences from home prevented your appreciating her virtues. She has probably gone to see Margaret Fallon, of whom she is very fond, and, as you say, lost the train.'

Margaret Fallon was a friend of Fan's who lived not far from the station at which she had been. With this crumb of comfort as meagre support for the night,

Mr. Harton summoned his household to family worship, and went to bed. Tom, on the contrary, sat up into the small hours, striving to study, and thinking all the while of Fan. Much as he fancied he disliked her, he was averse to having it supposed that he was the cause of her flight. He was selfish, but did not wish to appear so. Who does? Moreover, he only disliked Fan when she was impertinent and interfered with him. While vainly trying to fix his attention on a deep theological book, he seemed to see her brilliant face, and hear her parting words, as he had seen and heard them in that study the previous afternoon: 'I never want to see you again as long as I live.' It was a strong expression, and he could not get it out of his mind. What if she had followed it up by leaving him and Hoplands for good?

Another breakfast without Fan. It

was not so cheerless as the previous one, because the servant did her best to atone for it by providing for her master's comfort. But she could not supply Fan's cheery presence, or make the breakfast-table ring with her laughter and jests. Tom poured out the tea, and failed properly to replenish the pot, upon which his father commented much to the glorification of Fan. The dogs were dejected, and whined for their friend, while the starving birds pecked at the window-sill in vain.

'She will be back by the first train, Rolf,' said Mr. Harton, patting the retriever's curly head. 'I wish you would go and meet it, Tom, and show the poor child that you bear her no ill-will.'

As Tom wanted to relieve his conscience somehow, he finished his breakfast and went. As he passed the Park gates, Mr. Aspenel drove out. He stopped his brougham, and beckoned him in, asking

if he were going to town. Tom explained, and, as Mr. Aspenel had heard nothing of Fan's disappearance, Tom was obliged to recount it. He did not think it necessary to tell his own share in the event.

'I hope she will never come back,' said Mr. Aspenel. 'One pest the less in the parish. Your father should not encourage such vagabonds. One has enough to do to keep going without extraneous influences.'

'You are quite right, Mr. Aspenel,' said Tom, who always agreed with the millionaire, having an eye to the future.

Tom saw Mr. Aspenel off, and waited until the London train came in. Being, like his father, tolerably sure that Fan would appear, he stood preparing what he should say to her, and how he should best temper reproof with expression of pleasure at her return. He really hoped to see her, for he dreaded lest his participation in her absence might get wind.

His hopes were baseless, for the train steamed up, and no Fan got out of it. How could he face his father with the news? A thought struck him; he would telegraph to Fan's friend, Margaret Fallon, and wait for an answer. He did so at once. She lived quite near the station, and the answer could not be long in coming. He paid for a return telegram to expedite it, and addressed it to Miss Fallon. He had never before spent so long a quarter-of-an-hour. He paced up and down in the cold; he went into the small waiting-room to warm himself; he made inquiries of the station-master concerning Fan; he questioned the porter; he got through the interval somehow. The reply came at last.

'*Not been here.—M. Fallon to T. Harton.*'

Revulsions of feelings are strange anomalies. Tom had never before believed in them. He had a set code of laws and opinions, which were, in his own estima-

tion, unchangeable as those of the Medes and Persians. He had always considered Fan an interloper to be got rid of; now he would have sacrificed much to get her back again. How should he go to his father? 'Like Rolf, with his tail between his legs,' he thought, grimly. He met his father, who was alarmed at his prolonged absence, and could not rest indoors.

'Not come! What can have happened? She will be back by the next train,' said Mr. Harton.

'She is not at the Fallons,' said Tom.

'The responsibility is yours. She must have run away from you, Tom,' remarked Mr. Harton, despairingly.

'Impossible, father. But you will not allow so unlikely a suspicion to transpire. I will use every effort to find her, provided the blame of her disappearance is not thrust on my shoulders. We have had these quarrels and disputes ever since I

can remember, and she always held her own.'

'I am not likely to befoul my own nest. The first thing to do is to find the Tigress. Set about it; you are younger than I.'

They reached Hoplands, which they both entered, hopeless and dispirited.

CHAPTER V.

THE BALL AT THE PARK.

Days passed on, and there was no trace of Fan. Christmas came and went, and the bright spirit that had done much towards making it 'happy' in the past was absent from Roselands. Everybody lamented and sought her, but nobody found her. The young people at the Park were especially demonstrative in their regrets, and questioned Tom incessantly about her when he appeared there. Mrs. Aspenel, who was not interested in Fan, declared herself 'sick of the subject,' and at last it was discontinued in her presence. But not even Twelfth Night, with its festivities,

could divert it from the minds of Edith and Janet.

'I wish it was all over; I shall have no pleasure in it,' said Janet, on the eve of the eventful day. 'Not that poor Fan would have been here, but she would have been sharing our amusement in spirit. She was so unselfish. I feel sure some fancied idea of right took her away.'

'It has to do with the gipsies, and Mrs. Lee knows more than she allows,' replied Edith. 'It seems quite wrong to have this great party and poor Mr. Harton in so much anxiety about Fan, and dear Miss Lorne just buried.'

'She was nearly a hundred, and what else could one expect?' said Janet, philosophically. 'Besides, poor old Rebecca will marry now. But the Ladies have written to decline—all but Aunt Clarville, who has promised to come on my account. I tormented her into it.'

'I wish it was all over!' sighed Edith.

'I dislike gaiety, and papa is in such trouble about the expense that he and Mrs. Aspenel do nothing but quarrel.'

'Between ourselves, Edith, my dislike to her has turned into pity. I am sure she is very unhappy, and no one but Tom Harton and Bruce interest her. She is fond of you, in a way, and she and I get on better than I expected; still, she only tolerates us, and I am afraid she hates——'

'Oh, Janet, don't say that. Of course papa and she are ill-suited, but he is her husband!'

'More's the pity, Edith. I never mean to marry. One is better off superannuated at the Cottages; and if papa is eventually ruined, as he threatens, I can paint and teach till I get old, then prevail on some future owner of the Park, or a remote Lord Beechton, to nominate me.'

'The dresses have arrived from London, lovies, and Mrs. Aspenel wants you in her room to try them on,' here broke in Nurse

True. 'Remember the text, "A meek and quiet spirit," and don't be carried away by fine clothes.'

'And I've got a new suit of black velvet and point lace, and black silk stockings, mammy says,' shouted Bruce, who had followed Nurse True.

The girls found Mrs. Aspenel and her French maid, Pauline, inspecting what appeared to them a wardrobe of smart clothes. They had all come from an expensive and fashionable modiste's, and must have cost a fortune, if Mr. Aspenel could be prevailed upon to pay the bill. There was a crimson or 'crushed strawberry' velvet for Mrs. Aspenel, the black velvet suit for Bruce, and there were two elegant, fluffy, beflowered and beribboned white dresses for Edith and Janet. The wild roses with which they were adorned were chosen as equally becoming to both sisters. Indifference to such costumes was not to be expected, even from a Nurse True, and the

genuine pleasure of Janet and shy admiration of Edith gratified Mrs. Aspenel, who had undertaken the arrangement. She had even ordered that Janet's roses should be of the deeper, Edith's of the paler pink, to suit their respective complexions.

'How kind of you, dear Mrs. Aspenel!' exclaimed Janet, involuntarily kissing her step-mother, who smiled rather sadly, for it was the first time the 'dear' and the kiss had ever been spontaneous.

'I hope we shall not get you into trouble,' said Edith, also involuntarily, for she always looked for results.

'One must risk something, Edith, and you shall, at least, be properly introduced. People shall not say that I keep you back because I am afraid of being eclipsed.'

'We could never eclipse you. We could only be satellites moving about our primary, as Mr. Stern, our lecturer, says,' laughed Janet. 'We will all be gay and set one another off. I wish madame were

here, and monsieur, and Maximilien. But this dress will do for Paris, and they will see me in it if we go there again.'

Janet forgot Fan and all else that day. She and Bruce roamed from room to room, enjoying the unusual stir, while Mrs. Aspenel and Edith superintended the floral sacrifices. Happily, the master of the mansion was away, and only returned in time to dress and receive his guests.

He seemed perfectly satisfied with everything, and looked with unusual satisfaction on his family. He could scarcely have encountered anywhere four people better appointed or handsomer; and he himself was got up with an eye to effect. He did not disdain diamond studs or the very finest of linen and broadcloth. As his wife always thought, he would have been very good-looking but for his eyes. For once, however, they were 'a mutual admiration society,' and complimented one another on their personal appearance.

The Park was ablaze with light and astir with attendants when carriage after carriage, containing all the county magnates, arrived. We have neither time nor space to chronicle them; suffice it to say that Edith and Janet were duly introduced to all, and were evidently regarded with much admiration, the sparkling younger sister especially. The dinner was all that could be desired by the most fastidious, and Mrs. Aspenel, with Lord Beechton at her side, was in her element. Her husband also forgot his argosies for the space allotted to eating and drinking, and made a good host. But dinners, be they large or small, *recherché* or prosaic, are unromantic affairs, and Mrs. Aspenel's was no exception.

Still, it was accounted a 'success,' and she desired nothing more. She was determined not to see any sword of Damocles hanging over the feast. Edith looked shy and perplexed beneath the fire of common-places poured upon her by Mr. Laun-

ceston, Lord Beechton's eldest son; but Janet was quite at her ease between Sir Thomas Carney and young Preston, the son of the richest banker in England. The rector was the only member of the village coterie invited to the dinner, and Edith, at least, was longing to take refuge with Mrs. Clarville and Gerard.

Her wish was gratified as soon as the repast was over, for they, Tom Harton, and innumerable other guests, came for the subsequent dance. The large drawing-room had been dismantled for this, and duly prepared with linoleum and proper accessories. Musicians had arrived from town, and nothing was wanting to the introduction into society of the Miss Aspenels. Bruce was permitted to stay up for an hour or so, and was much befooled by ready flatterers. Poor Nurse True was the only one who had time to think or ask herself, 'What is the good of all this?'

Naturally, Edith and Janet were the

belles of the ball-room, and sought for by all the beaux. Mrs. Aspenel was such an admirable hostess, however, that she contrived they should not monopolise partners, but that less attractive damsels should have their share.

'Let me introduce you to So-and-so,' she said to Tom Harton, who was her obedient slave, shrugged his shoulders, and danced with whomsoever she commanded.

But he managed to secure Edith and Janet during the course of the evening, responding to their questions concerning Fan by a melancholy shake of the head. Mrs. Clarville and her son were amongst the most distinguished-looking people present, and Mrs. Aspenel did not fail to victimise Gerard as well as Harton. But dances, like dinners, are all more or less alike, and too often leave behind them both an indigestion and a sense of disappointment. If Janet was disappointed, however, it was not for lack of partners or

admiration. Mr. Aspenel was charmed to see that not only the 'son of the richest banker in London,' but the heir of all the Beechtons was devoted to her. She certainly looked magnificently handsome, and what with her touch of coquetry and irrepressible vivacity was almost irresistible.

Still, Edith was, perhaps, the happier, for she fled to Mrs. Clarville whenever she could, and Gerard hovered over her like a brother or some protecting friend.

'Why do you not come more forward, Edith, like your sister? She carries all before her,' startled her in her father's voice, words whispered into her ear, but intelligible enough.

Why did he glance suspiciously at Gerard Clarville, who was biding his time for a dance with her?

'Lady Claverton wishes to know you,' added Mr. Aspenel aloud, taking her off to a portly dowager with several sons and daughters.

The glance was quite intelligible both to Gerard and his mother, who regretted that they had not adhered to their original resolution of declining the invitation. But Edith did not understand it, and was much distressed when she looked about her for her friends to find they had left the room. They had, indeed, quitted the gay scene for good, and with them flitted off the pleasure of the evening for Edith Aspenel.

It, or more properly the morning, ended all too soon for Janet, who was the 'admired of all admirers.' Mrs. Aspenel, too, regretted when it was over, for she was delighted to be once more in the vortex of the society to which she was accustomed. She and Janet, lovers of excitement, were drawn together by this brief interlude, while Edith seemed somehow farther away from them than before. She felt that her father's eyes were on her, and that he expected more from her than she could give. Once again he spoke to

her, and asked, rather satirically, if she were enjoying her 'coming out,' since she did nothing but look about her.

'I am wondering what has become of Mrs. Clarville,' she replied.

'Oh! she has left with her son. You are too intimate with them, Edith. It is time to give up your intercourse with the poor ladies of the Aspenel Homes.'

These words grated sadly upon Edith, and she was glad when her period of probation, or 'introduction,' was over. Nevertheless, she was interested in watching Janet, even while doing her best to be agreeable to the various partners who presented themselves.

'You have scored a success, at any rate, Janet,' said Mr. Aspenel, as the last carriage drove off. 'Edith is nowhere beside you.'

'Edith was much admired,' spoke up Mrs. Aspenel.

'And a pretty penny to pay,' concluded

the father, glancing round him, as he retired to rest.

'You have made a conquest of Mr. Launceston, Janet,' said Mrs. Aspenel, 'but the "richest banker in London" admires Edith most. What made the Clarvilles leave so early?'

This was a question that neither girl could answer, so, after a short discussion of the successful party, the ladies followed Mr. Aspenel's example, and retired. Nurse True was waiting for her darlings, having sent their maid to bed, and was prepared to moralise over the uncertainty of human pleasures and pains, which Janet resented by expatiating on the delights of balls and beaux. But Nurse True's view of things was soundest, to judge from what happened that very day.

Mr. Aspenel breakfasted alone. Even he was late, and his womankind had not risen. He looked moody, and even his beloved red tape and documents failed to

interest him. He missed Edith's little attentions, and was uttering some uncomplimentary words when she came in, looking paler than usual. She just touched his cheek with her lips, and began to arrange his papers, seeing that he had finished breakfast.

'I meant to be in time,' she said.

'Late hours make everything go wrong,' he muttered. 'Is the carriage there?'

Edith glanced from the window and answered in the affirmative. He prepared to go.

'Remember what I said last night, Edith. You must withdraw from your intercourse with the Homes now you are introduced into the world. It was a mistake my letting the old ladies teach you, as was my nominating a connection to the charity.'

'I cannot give them up, papa,' murmured Edith; but her father was gone without hearing the words. 'What am I

to do? What are we all to do?' she said, half aloud. 'Surely Mrs. Clarville and Gerard are as truly gentlefolks as any who were here last night.'

Then she sat down to breakfast and pondered over her vexed life, and the lives of those with whom she was associated. She was a woman now, and she would have to play her part in the world. What was it to be? She would strive to do her duty, but how amid the perplexing elements that surrounded her? Janet, at least, was safe for awhile, for she was to return to school for another twelvemonth, after which she felt sure she would marry. She thought with a sort of awe of the admiration she had excited, and wondered, as girls wonder, as to the future of this beautiful sister. She did not dare to think of her own. She had no desires beyond the limited sphere of the Park, the village, and the Cottages, and she trembled as she recalled her father's commands. She knew that her greatest

happiness was in her visits to her old friends, and she could never, never give them up. As to Mrs. Clarville and Gerard —relations as well as friends—it was preposterous. Poor Edith! She had, perhaps, seen over-much of Gerard Clarville.

CHAPTER VI.

LOSS OF PLACE.

Gerard Clarville was at his work when Mr. Aspenel reached his office. He was not surprised at receiving a summons from his employer, because he was continually summoning him for one cause or another, and was looked upon by his co-employés as a confidential agent. They were, indeed, slightly jealous of him.

'Morning, Clarville,' began Mr. Aspenel, who was distant or familiar as the fit took him. 'I find I must send some one on whom I can rely as my agent in Australia. As you know, the American post which you declined is filled up. If you like to

accept this and five hundred a-year, you can have it. You must go at once.'

Gerard saw through the meaning of this offer, as he had seen through the suspicious look of the previous evening. He was to be banished from the neighbourhood of Edith.

'If I could not go to America, sir, on account of my mother, I could scarcely leave her for a more distant continent; but I am not the less obliged to you for the offer,' he returned, cautiously, but with an insensible haughtiness.

'Then, as you decline all my proposals of advancement, perhaps you had better seek employment elsewhere,' said Mr. Aspenel, frigidly, avoiding Gerard's look.

'I was not aware that I had offended you,' replied Gerard.

'That is not the question. I offer you advancement, and have a person ready to fill your place here, if you accept my offer.

You decline, and are therefore superseded.'

'That seems arbitrary, sir. I have served you honestly, and, to the best of my knowledge, have done nothing to deserve dismissal.'

'You refuse to oblige me and take an influential post; I can no longer oblige you by retaining you in this.'

'It would scarcely be an obligation, since I have worked early and late in your service; but of course, if you wish to get rid of me, I have no more to say. The man Loveridge put this letter into my hands this morning, with a request that I would deliver it to you. Am I to consider myself dismissed from your office?'

'You are, unless you consent to go to Australia.'

'Mr. Aspenel, I am my mother's only child. I cannot leave her. She is provided for, thanks to your nomination, though I had hoped soon to be enabled to

ask her to live with me, so as to open her present home to another as necessitous as she was.'

'And how did you expect to manage this? Not on two hundred a-year!'

'No, but on three, which I thought it possible to rise to in your good time.'

There was the slightest breath of sarcasm in these last words, and Mr. Aspenel felt it. He was turning over the letter Gerard had given him, and wondering whether the young man contemplated marrying Edith, and so rising from comparative penury to affluence. But the concluding sentence baffled him. Parsimony and suspicion go hand in hand, and he could not comprehend Gerard's unselfish devotion and openness. He put forth another feeler.

'On five hundred a-year you could take your mother with you to Australia, since you value her present abode so lightly. I would advance her passage-money, which

you could repay at your leisure; yours, of course, I should defray.'

'I could not put the bait before her, sir, because I know she would swallow it, if she thought it was for my good. Had I only myself to consider, I would not hesitate—for it matters little to me where I live—but I could not uproot my mother.'

Mr. Aspenel frowned, and hastily broke open the letter, as if touched by what Gerard said. When he had read it, Gerard asked if he could be of any further service as go-between. He did not use that word, but he added,

'The man Loveridge looks in better condition than when I saw him last, and I mistook him for a gentleman when he spoke to me. He said he had changed his lodgings, but that Wharf Court would still find him any evening between now and to-morrow week. After that date he should probably be out of England, if you consented to his claim.'

'I neither can nor will consent to it, and, if you see him again, you may tell him so.'

Mr. Aspenel struck the table with his clenched fist, and appeared much exasperated.

'I am not likely to see him again, unless I can be of service to you as your ambassador. I should be glad to do the poor fellow a good turn, for I think he is more his own enemy than any one else's.'

'How have you found that out, Mr. Clarville? Have you been tampering with his secrets?'

'No; I merely have had a talk with the inmates of Wharf Court now and again, and he declared himself anxious to turn over a new leaf, if he had the chance. Many a sad reprobate would try to begin a new life if opportunity offered; and, thanks to nineteenth-century philanthropy, it does offer now and then. But I am taking up your time, sir. Am I to con-

sider myself dismissed from your service? And, if so, how long may I remain?'

'Until you have secured another situation. But I advise you to think over my proposal as regards Australia, and to lay it before your mother.'

Gerard withdrew, and it would be difficult to say whether he or Mr. Aspenel were the most perplexed by the result of the interview. Both found their work difficult, but Gerard's brain was clear, for he had slept after his unusual dissipation; whereas Mr. Aspenel's was clouded by wine, sleeplessness, and many of the worries that grow out of riches.

They did not meet again that day. As soon as Gerard's work was done, and he had made himself presentable, he resolved to go at once to Lady Ascham's. He had paid her frequent visits since they met in the train, as recorded in a previous chapter, and she would have overwhelmed him with work had he not assured her that he

had already as much as he could manage. He had the rare gift of common-sense, and, while wishful to devote his spare time to the good of his fellow-creatures, would not borrow what he could never repay, *i.e.*, hours from the future. He never crammed into one day's work enough for two, and thus contrived to keep brain manageable and temper equable.

Gerard found Lady Ascham alone but for her big Persian cat sleeping on her lap. She had dined, and welcomed him warmly. She had taken a fancy to him, and he had found her ready to sympathise in his plans while she demanded sympathy in her own. He was glad of the strong coffee that came in soon after he did, and which she assured him would keep him awake, if anything would.

'I always doze after dinner till I drink it, and then I am able to resume work,' she said. 'I suppose you were up all night.

I couldn't go to the Aspenel festivities, though my friend Mrs. Aspenel offered me a bed. I am overdone with work, and am looking for a secretary.'

'Will you accept me *pro tem.*, Lady Ascham? I am about to leave Mr. Aspenel's office.'

Lady Ascham looked amazed, inquired, and Gerard told her what had happened.

'Are you wise to throw up your position and all your prospects?' she asked.

'I scarcely know, but I cannot leave my mother. She has sacrificed everything for me, and I would not unsettle her for the world,' he answered.

'It would be *infra dig.* for such a young man as you to be secretary to a faddy old woman like me; and I should torment you out of your life. I want somebody who will manage my personal affairs as well as my philanthropies, which my friends are kind enough to say will be my ruin. In-

deed, they have got so muddled up that I scarcely know what belongs to me and what to the public.'

Lady Ascham laughed the genial laugh that always delighted Gerard.

'Perhaps I could disentangle the web,' he said, joining in it.

'In my person, you would have to be honorary secretary to a hundred societies; patroness of all the hospitals; canvasser for elections to homes innumerable; almoner to beggars of every denomination; visitor to all sorts of outcasts.'

'I should like it,' said Gerard, enthusiastically.

'You would be asked to take my place as platform orator, and speechifier at teas and suppers; for, to the scandal of my relations, I have come before the public in that line. After all, it is more honourable than the line some of them have taken. I have actually a titled cousin on the stage, acting for money under a feigned name,

and lots of 'em singing, and writing, and painting for gain. I tell 'em that they take the bread out of the mouths of hundreds of respectable people, who come to me for charity because they are superseded by a crowd of apes. I beg their pardon for strong language.'

'I think I could help you, Lady Ascham.'

'But my affairs, Mr. Clarville. I haven't looked into them for ages, and I am afraid I have overdrawn my account at my bankers.'

'My training at Mr. Aspenel's, and my work among the poor might help me to be of use to you. At any rate, I should be glad to try until you can get a more suitable person, and I another post.'

'Agreed. When will you come? What is your present salary?'

'Two hundred a-year.'

'Is that all? I can manage to continue it, and, as you will not, I think, be wanted

here all the day, you may find other work elsewhere.'

'Oh! Lady Ascham. You have indeed taken a weight from my mind. I am truly grateful to you, and so will be my mother.'

'I had a son once,' said Lady Ascham, holding out her hand to Gerard, 'and it was to fill my mind, made vacant by his and my husband's loss, that I undertook more work than I can manage. You will help me in all ways.'

Gerard took the offered hand, and inwardly vowed to do his best to aid and comfort one who had so nobly striven.

It was late when Gerard got home to his lodging in the old close. Nevertheless he was accosted on its doorstep by a man whom he found to be the Loveridge concerning whom Mr. Aspenel appeared to be in so much perplexity.

'Any answer to my missive?' he asked, abruptly.

'Mr. Aspenel says he neither can nor will do what you ask,' replied Gerard. 'But why do you persecute him? Can I be of any use to you?'

'No one can be of use to me but Aspenel, and he can and shall. And I know no one but you to whom I can apply as mediator,' said Loveridge.

'I fear what chance you had with me is gone. I am to leave his service shortly,' returned Gerard.

'Not on my account? Not because you have taken my letters to him?' asked the man, with some agitation.

'No. You have nothing to do with it. But I shall at least see him to-morrow, and will take another message if you have anything important to say.'

'Tell him that it will be worse for him and his if he does not comply with my request. I wonder that he isn't glad to get rid of me. But, to be sure, he has been quit of me so often and I have turned

up again, that he is tired of the effort. One always "returns to one's first love," as the French say, ha, ha!'

'Are you Wandering Will?' asked Gerard, doubtfully.

'I am Wandering Loveridge, if you will; but I am not acquainted with the gentleman you mention,' replied Loveridge, whose clean-shaven face and almost gentlemanlike dress proved the truth of his words.

'Had you not better speak to Mr. Aspenel yourself? I dislike working in the dark, and shall find a difficulty now even in delivering your message.'

'You see, Mr. Clarville, that we both believe in you, because you are honest. Pity Diogenes hadn't known you; he wouldn't have needed his lanthorn. This is a cool, sequestered spot, ha, ha! No chance of bobbies, so I will be here on Monday night at half-past ten, in case you should have anything to say.'

Gerard was about to reply, but the man

was gone. He was not sorry, for, brave as he was naturally and accustomed to strange characters, he did not feel at ease with this nondescript gentleman in that very quiet corner. The close was well-named, and always suggested *clôture* to Gerard; for, when the great warehouses were shut up, there was no stir, and, save in his lodging, neither light nor life. But he liked it, and was wont to think of the time when it was probably filled with church dignitaries instead of bales of goods, waggons, and carts. At the moment the moon and stars were looking down upon it from a cold, clear sky, and might have wondered at the strange peace of this enclosure, in the great, throbbing, tumultuous heart of bustling, noisy, awful London.

He had a latch-key, and let himself into the one inhabited house of the close. Pottle was a sort of caretaker, and his wife also took care of sundry 'young gentlemen,' who lodged or boarded with her, in

the tall house, once, as she expressed it, 'a genteel dwelling.'

Among these were Gerard, in whose room a fire was still alight. He stirred it up, put on more coal, and sat over it, meditating on his change of prospects, and unmindful of the diminished contents of his 'scuttle.' It was bitterly cold; but still he sat on and on, ruminating. The more he thought, the more certain he became that this change was due to Edith Aspenel. Would she be henceforth as a stranger to him, and should he thus lose sight of one of the lights of his life? Why, oh why, had he allowed himself to think so much of her?

CHAPTER VII.

A MESSAGE FOR EDITH.

The frame of mind in which Mr. Aspenel returned to the bosom of his family was anything but auspicious. He found everything still topsy-turvy, and, being in a bad temper, he retired to his own particular den as soon as he had swallowed his dinner. He was an inveterate smoker, and, while Gerard was ruminating in his close, he was meditating on him, Loveridge, the expenses of party-giving, Edith, and the manifold responsibilities of money, cigar in mouth, and some mixture stronger than water at his side.

At breakfast the following morning he

appeared unusually brisk, and, instead of diving into his papers, he entered into conversation with his wife and daughters. They discussed the party, and he seemed interested in the details and results.

'Everybody said it was a great success,' remarked his wife.

'It certainly was, if the flowing of champagne and the consumption of all the good things you managed to gather together is a proof of it,' he replied. 'You won't mind getting in the bills at once, as I should like to know how much it all cost.'

'Certainly,' said Mrs. Aspenel, who was expecting this.

'It was worth anything to see people enjoy themselves so thoroughly,' put in Janet. 'Lady Beechton said it was the most delightful party she was ever at.'

Mr. Aspenel smiled.

'How much longer should Janet remain at school, Mrs. Aspenel?' he asked. 'When are the holidays over?'

Some little discussion ensued between Mrs. Aspenel and Janet, which ended in Mr. Aspenel clinching it by expressing his opinion that one year more would render Janet quite accomplished, and that she had better go back to the day.

'Oh! I am quite ready, papa,' said Janet, cheerfully. 'Then I can have another season in Paris, and go on with my painting.'

'Then that is settled. So, of course, is Edith's education. She has quite finished, and need have no further teaching, Mrs. Aspenel. Now she is introduced, she must give up the village and frequent the neighbourhood. We will accept those invitations to Beechton and Ashley Park, and enter more into society.'

'Thank you. We shall all be glad,' said the wife, wondering what was the secret of these concessions.

'Oh, papa! I dislike gaiety and new people,' said Edith, involuntarily.

'You must overcome your dislike. You must mix with people in your own rank of life. You have been allowed too much liberty.'

Poor Edith looked distressed, but said nothing; Mrs. Aspenel spoke for her. She said that hitherto she had been restricted to the immediate neighbours, but that she would soon get accustomed to other society. Edith was sure she never should, but she did not venture to say so.

'What does it all mean?' she asked, as her father left the room, and descended the grand staircase.

'That Janet is to be the future Lady Beechton, and that you are to find some other embryo lord as soon as it can be managed,' replied her step-mother.

'These "good intentions" make papa quite agreeable,' laughed Janet, watching him as he got into his brougham.

He did not feel as agreeable as he seemed, and soon relapsed into his usual

contemplative condition. Inward, not outward, contemplation was his normal state, and in those precincts which he devoted to this abstraction were gathered at the moment Gerard, Loveridge, Wandering Will, and others, to say nothing of the family party he left behind. But the masculine element prevailed over the feminine, and he began to wonder what he should do without Gerard, in more ways than one. He was obliged to confess that he was a most valuable aid to him. His ambition was, however, more important than his clerk, and he had resolved that his girls should make grand matches, and not run the chance of losing their hearts to inferior people. He could not be rid of Loveridge so easily; and his mind darkened when he thought of him.

He did not see Gerard for some hours after he reached town. He was too proud or too weak to summon him, and had a sort of hope that he would see his way to

fortune by going to Australia. But he was disabused when Gerard came to his office and began the subject so near both their hearts.

'You were so good as to say, sir, that I might remain in my present position until I was assured of another,' he said. 'Lady Ascham has been so kind as to offer me the post of secretary, and I have accepted it. I shall be ready to leave you whenever you think fit.'

Mr. Aspenel uttered an exclamation not very complimentary to Lady Ascham, and inquired if Gerard had not enough old women already, to pet and be petted by, without adding another to the list.

'I have no choice, sir. You fill my place, because I cannot fall in with your wish that I should go to Australia; and Lady Ascham proposes that I should work for her. I look on this as a Divine interposition.'

'Nonsense. Are you to live with her?'

'That has not been mooted. I suppose I shall continue my present routine, which is what I most wish.'

Aspenel felt utterly circumvented. He would lose Gerard, and still not be rid of him.

'I thought you had higher aspirations than to submit to the whims of a woman. Private secretary to a Lady Ascham means that you will be a drudge to every philanthropic movement—as they call it—in and out of London.'

'I shall at least be of some use.'

'You will be able to preach and pray to your heart's content. You will have all the vagabonds of London at your feet. What of Loveridge?'

This sudden transition stayed an irritable rejoinder on Gerard's lips, and caused him to deliver the man's message as calmly as he could. It had not so salutary an

effect on Aspencl. He used some strong language before he resumed, and was evidently in a passion when he said,

'Tell him to come to me to-morrow at ten. I see I must settle him myself. You say he looks respectable?'

'Yes. I thought him a gentleman. His manner is good, and his language that of a man of education.'

'He is a consummate fool—a ne'er-do-well in whom I was interested years ago, and who won't let me alone. Did he confide in you?'

'No; I know nothing of him.'

'You have come in for two of my *bêtes-noires*—Wandering Will and this Loveridge. You will, perhaps, keep your interviews with them secret, as one doesn't care to have one's charities talked about, you know.'

Gerard restrained an expression of amused surprise, and promised secrecy. Then

he inquired when it would suit Mr. Aspenel to let him leave.

'Not at present: certainly not at present; though your successor will begin, as you did, at a nominal salary. What does Lady Ascham give you?'

'What I receive from you, sir. Two hundred a-year.'

'And you might have five, if you had any courage, and were not witch-ridden.'

Gerard thought of his mother and Edith, and felt that the strong term was not altogether inapplicable, for he was certainly 'bewitched.'

'I will stay here till Lady Ascham wants me,' he said; and, not liking the expression of Aspenel's face, devoutly hoped it would be soon.

That evening, being Saturday, he was with his mother. He had not written to her, preferring to keep the events of the last few days for verbal repetition. She

was naturally alarmed at first by his disclosures; but when she learnt that she was not to lose him, but that he would probably be more with her under the new than the old *régime*, she was consoled. He told her all, and she tried to urge him to accept the Australian post, but, in doing so, broke down.

'Do not fear that I shall ever leave you, dearest mother,' he said. 'We have enough for our daily wants; let it suffice.'

'He has led us hitherto, and will lead us on,' said Mrs. Clarville, looking up; 'but I fear there is trial before you, Gerard.'

'You mean Edith, dear mother. I have never said a word to her that her father might not have heard. Still, there was no mistaking his look and manner. She had only taken refuge with you, mother, like a white mouse, as Janet calls her; and I know not what she will think of my leaving without the dance she promised me. But it is best for her. The man must be

a villain indeed who would cause her pain.'

Mrs. Clarville looked at her son. They were, as usual, side by side on the small couch, which was drawn up to the fire, and the extreme cold of the outer world was excluded as much as possible from the small room by thick curtains, and such contrivances of Gerard's as could protect her from the frosty atmosphere.

'You love her,' she said, taking his hand.

'Yes, mother. I have loved her long, and always known it was hopeless,' he replied.

They were silent. His secret, if it were one, was the only one that existed between them, and, now it was revealed, no cloud obscured their perfect confidence.

'This, like all the events of our lives, is in safer hands than ours,' she said at last.

'I know it, mother, and leave it to God's guidance. I can bear so long as she is happy; and she will not suspect the

reason of her father's change or why I must henceforth be all but a stranger to her. It was apparent on that hateful evening that she and Janet may command the county. How despicable is this craze for wealth! I am glad that I am to be taken from the contemplation of Mr. Aspenel's millions to Lady Ascham's treasury for the poor.

'But not in bitterness of spirit, my son,' said Mrs. Clarville, as Gerard's fine face was shadowed.

'I hope not, mother; I will do my very best. Has anything been heard of Fan?'

Mrs. Clarville understood the sudden change of subject. Not even she could entirely share the feelings of one suddenly brought face to face with love, ambition, and avarice. She told him that poor Fan was still a mystery, and that Mr. Harton was in a state of great anger and excitement about her. He attributed her disappearance to his son Tom's animosity, and

offered all he possessed to anyone who should find her. But Mrs. Clarville was of opinion that there was some romance at the bottom of the girl's flight, though what she could not imagine, since no one gave her credit for caring for anyone but her friend Jack.

Mother and son talked on, discussing many things, until it was time for Gerard to go to the rectory, where a room was always kept prepared for him. The embrace and the 'God bless you!' were even more emphatic than usual, for an involuntary depression over-shadowed them. But Mr. Austen's warm, fatherly welcome roused Gerard to present duties, and he was soon involved in parish gossip. He and the vicar sat up late, but he had not the courage to mention the change in his circumstances.

Sunday dawned brightly on a frost-bound world. His spirits revived in the exhilarating country atmosphere, and when he

looked out upon the icicles pendant from eaves and trees, and the glorious sun shining through them and transforming them into jewels, his hopes rose with the changes of nature. The coldest, hardest world revives beneath the sunshine, and the coldest, hardest heart melts beneath God's love. He breakfasted with Mr. Austen, and accompanied him to the school. Edith was there, and Janet was taking Fan's class. He did not himself teach, but waited while the vicar opened the school with the customary prayer, then left it with him and went to his mother. He fancied that Edith smiled at him as he passed her class but had no opportunity of speaking to her.

'So best,' he thought, with a sigh of regret and mortification. Janet—beautiful, resolute Janet—nodded, and arrested him a moment to say she wanted to speak to him.

'I will come in after church,' she said.

She did so, and poured out a flood of reproaches as rapidly as possible.

'Why did you run away the other evening, Gerard? It was most unkind, and we are all offended. If Aunt Clarville was bored, you might have remained. I am sure Edith was hurt, for she told me you were engaged to dance with her, and you left without even an apology.'

'Your father carried her off, Janet,' broke in Mrs. Clarville, for Gerard said nothing.

'But he ought to have waited, aunt. *I* shouldn't have cared, but Edith did. Anyone may neglect me, but it is wicked to be unkind to Edith, for she never asserts herself. When I come home for good I shall be of some use, for I mean to fight her battles as well as my own. May I take her a message from you, Gerard?'

'You may say that it was not my fault that I left so abruptly, and I am sure she

will believe me,' said Gerard, as if measuring his words.

'You are as cold as the outside frost; and yet you are the most warm-hearted of cousins,' cried Janet. 'Can't you send a kinder message than that? You, who have known Edith so long, and must love her almost as well as Nurse True and I do. I wonder if all men are as provoking as papa, you, and Mr. Tom Harton. What if Edith were to run away, like Fan? If all the men in the world were to lecture me, I shouldn't mind.'

'Bravo, Janet! When you come to these straits, I will be your champion. But has anyone been lecturing you—or—or Miss Aspenel?'

'Papa has been bothering Edith. He tells her that she must make new acquaintances and give up the old, and she is miserable. Why, she would rather potter about here at the Cottages than visit all the lords and ladies from England to the

Zenanas. But I must go. Do give me a kind message for Edith! Send her your love, or something.'

His love! Poor fellow, he would gladly have sent that, though not through Janet, but he knew that duty forbade all interchange of sentiment. His mother, looking from him to Janet, spoke for him.

'Dear child, there are circumstances in life which forbid heart speaking to heart, or even the free interchange of friendship. I am sure there is no one that Gerard esteems more highly than Edith, and this you may venture to tell her; but your father has his reasons for what he has said to her, and we are in no condition to gainsay them. Take care that the same restrictions are not laid on you.'

'I should break through them. What is the good of growing up if we are to throw off all we love, and dress ourselves up in all we hate. I shall give Edith aunt's message verbatim, Gerard; only I

shall change that awful word "esteem," into the more natural one "love." Mr. Austen has just said in his sermon that we should all "Love one another," and I am sure no one listened more profoundly than papa; and I know he wasn't asleep. Good-bye.'

'Janet! Janet!' exclaimed Mrs. Clarville and Gerard, but the light-spirited, warm-hearted girl was gone.

CHAPTER VIII.

A QUARREL.

'This is absolute ruin! What fortune could stand this? Hundreds and thousands squandered to no purpose. A hundred and fifty pounds for a milliner's bill; *chef*, band, champagne, claret, waiters, carpenters, red cloth, linoleum, incandescent lights, flowers, ice, travelling expenses, fish, poultry, every kind of kickshaw French and English, butcher's bill, baker's, enormous expenditure of cream and butter, and all to introduce two daughters! Then, servants' wages, and general household expenses, school-bill, horses—new riding horse for Edith—tutor, repair of

Homes—Lord B. shall do that—glass-houses, gardens, lodges, etc., etc., etc., all on the shoulders of one man! I can't pay, and I won't.'

Thus soliloquised Mr. Aspenel, seated in his private room, with a shower of bills covering the table before him. He got up, paced the room, ran his fingers through his hair, and resumed:

'These enormous losses, too, will ruin me! All the clerks to be paid in town, and no one to be depended upon since Clarville left. All the farce of charity, just to seem well with the world. Anxieties at home and abroad; everything depreciating; Funds low, trade ruined, the mercantile world going to destruction; earthquakes here, explosions there, collisions of ships everywhere. Turn which way I will, I am attacked. The forces of nature are against me, and I have no one who cares whether I am ruined or not—not even my wife—no one but, perhaps,

Edith. Yet I am reckoned one of the richest men in the world. A mistake that; I am far behind some of those Americans; but I shall be farther still if this goes on.'

He rang the bell violently, and, when it was answered, told the man to ask Mrs. Aspenel if she would be so good as to spare him a few minutes' conversation. He was always particular not to let his domestics into his secrets, public or private. He sat down again, and suddenly remembered that he had left Tom Harton with his wife and Edith, and wished he had not summoned Mrs. Aspenel. But she came, almost before the wish had expired. He rose and placed a chair for her. He was, or tried to be, scrupulously polite.

'I have been looking over these accounts, Mrs. Aspenel,' he began, in his driest manner, 'and I find them preposterous. There are many—the milliner's bills especially—that I positively decline to pay.'

'Then I fear they must remain unpaid,' replied his wife, for 'neither I nor your daughters have the money. I merely ordered such things as were necessary for the occasion, and I believe you requested that no expense should be spared.'

'In moderation, Mrs. Aspenel. This is immoderate, and you will not understand that I am on the verge of ruin.' He spoke impressively.

'You have been on the verge ever since I knew you; I wonder you haven't lost your equilibrium,' she said, with her most provoking manner.

And she could be provoking. She had been bracing up her mind for this discussion, which she expected, and had resolved neither to be frightened nor yielding. It had taken some time to get in all the bills, but she had not submitted them piecemeal to her husband, lest she should have to go through multiplied reproaches. During the interim, winter was vanishing

beneath the green skirts of spring, and Janet had again left home for school.

'If you will kindly draw nearer me, and give me your attention, I can show you what I mean by impending ruin,' he said, mastering temper.

She obeyed, and they sat side-by-side, the bills outspread before them. She knew very well that she had far exceeded the absolute necessities of an entertainment, but she had been so long kept down that she had rebelled, and ignored consequences. As he went through item after item of the complicated accounts with iron will and steel-cold voice, she acknowledged to herself that had he been an ordinary mortal she should have considered them rather excessive; but, as he was a millionaire, a few hundreds more or less could not matter. Besides, she had taken a naughty pleasure in heaping up the items. Not only before but since the party she had taken *carte blanche*, and filled in the white

sheet according to her fancy. Edith and Nurse True had looked on in terror; Janet had rejoiced. Indeed, Janet's high spirits and the effect she had produced in the neighbourhood encouraged her step-mother in her efforts at emancipation. Without being absolutely in collusion, they worked together to enjoy the passing moment.

'One cannot introduce two singularly attractive girls into society and keep up the ball without flagging, as we have done, and not pay for it, Mr. Aspenel,' she said, as he pointed to the milliner's bills. 'The same dresses cannot reappear at different places, and, as you know, we have been inundated with invitations. I never saw a girl make such a success as Janet, and, if she is to finish up by a grand match, one cannot consider pounds, shillings, and pence.'

'One must, Mrs. Aspenel,' he rejoined; but he smiled with a sort of grim satisfaction at the mention of Janet's successes.

He knew very well that all her fascinations and Edith's gentler charms would have been displayed in vain but for the probable golden accompaniments; that is to say, would have made no effect upon the multitude.

'Everyone remarks upon the good looks of the children,' she said, presuming on the smile. 'As to Bruce, people think him like you; but I cannot see it. He resembles my family.'

'Married people are said to grow alike,' he rejoined, with a sarcastic inflection of voice.

'I hope not,' was on her lips, but she restrained it.

Time would be lost were we to recapitulate all that passed between this ill-assorted pair; but Mrs. Aspenel's determination to hold her own only incensed her husband, and they quarrelled as they had never done before. His temper was violent, hers was also hot, recrimination succeeded to

anger, abuse to recrimination. Such scenes are awful in themselves, and best unchronicled. When men and women lose self-control and become indifferent to results, humanity is degraded to brutality; and this not only in the uneducated and unrefined, but in the cultured and outwardly polished. That root of all evil, money, is, in one way or another, frequently the cause of such degradation, and those who worship it must not complain if the relish of life is tainted by metallic flavour.

The lesson was effectually learnt in that oak-ceiled room, near the paper-strewn table. The clenched fist and set features of the gold-worshipper frightened his wife, who got up in terror and went to the door. He followed her, infuriated, and what the demon within him might have done, had she not succeeded in opening the door and escaping, neither he nor she ever knew.

While this domestic drama was being

played, Edith and Tom Harton were left alone. He did his best to amuse and interest her, as he had the gift of doing, but, as time sped on, Edith grew alarmed.

'Something must be wrong,' she said.

'Probably only a little money difference,' he suggested. 'When I left Mr. Aspenel this afternoon, his table was covered with bills.'

'Papa always looks into his accounts on Saturday, when he comes home early,' she replied, not liking the allusion which had escaped him.

A few minutes afterwards Mrs. Aspenel came in. She had paused a moment to recover herself, and had so far mastered her terror as to enable her to apologise for her lengthened absence. But she looked so pale, stern, and angry that it was evident the words 'money difference' were not far wrong. Edith was frightened; Tom Harton wished good-night.

'If I can be of any use, you will com-

mand me,' he said to Mrs. Aspenel, in a low, confidential tone, and to Edith—'I shall not fail to bring you that song.' To himself he muttered in the hall, 'Climax at last.'

'What is the matter? What has happened?' asked Edith, when they were left alone.

'Come to my room and I will tell you. Your father!' was all Mrs. Aspenel could say.

She ran upstairs, Edith after her. When they reached her room, she locked the door, and fell, half-fainting, on a couch; then went into hysterics.

Edith calmed her by degrees. Then she broke out in passionate exclamations.

'It is this odious money. He would have knocked me down had I not escaped. He will kill me. I will not see him again. Sacrificed to Moloch. My prospects and life have been ruined; and for what? For an idea—the fancy that money could buy

happiness. Edith, don't let him sacrifice you. I have not done my duty by you and Janet, but I warn you now; take example by me. I am the most miserable woman in the world.'

'Can you not look beyond this world, dear Mrs. Aspenel?' said Edith. 'We shall be surely guided if we ask for guidance.'

'I am past that, Edith. But leave me now, and send Pauline. If your father asks for me, say I am gone to bed; say, if you will, that I will never see him again; say that he may keep his own house, pay his own bills, receive his own guests; say——'

'That you are his wife, dear, and will talk over these worries to-morrow, or, at least, Monday,' put in Edith, soothingly. 'A quiet Sunday will soften papa, and perhaps let you see things differently.'

'His wife! impossible!' exclaimed Mrs. Aspenel, breaking out into a strange laugh, followed by a burst of tears.

Edith put her arms round her, but failed to soothe her. There was a tap at the door.

'Admit no one but Pauline,' she said.

It was Nurse True, who came to say that Mr. Aspenel was inquiring for Edith.

'Let Nurse True come in while I go,' pleaded Edith. 'She will know exactly what to say and do.'

Without waiting for permission, she beckoned Mrs. Trueman in and slipped away. She found her father awaiting her in the drawing-room.

'Where is Mrs. Aspenel?' he asked, and his look was fierce, his voice harsh.

'She has gone to bed, papa. She is not well,' was the gentle reply.

'Not well! She is well enough to be my ruin. Tell her I must see her at once.'

'She has been hysterical, and perhaps you had better not disturb her to-night. To-morrow she will be better.'

Edith was much alarmed, for she knew

not whether her father or step-mother were the more excited. But she knew that they should not meet in their present frame of mind. She did what she had advised Mrs. Aspenel to do, inwardly asked for guidance, and then laid her small hand on her father's arm and said, very quietly,

'It was a pity that so much should have been spent to so little purpose, but if you will overlook it, and consider that it was done with the intention of introducing me and Janet into what is called society, it need never occur again. Dear papa, after all, riches are not everything. Love is better.'

'Love!' almost hissed the millionaire. 'Who loves me?'

'I do—we all should, if—if it were not for money. Is not that what is meant by "the god of this world"?'

For a moment his face relaxed, and he

met the sweet eyes of his child with a sort of shame; but it was only for a moment. The next he hardened his heart, and told her she spoke of a subject of which she was quite ignorant.

'I only know my own feelings,' she said, humbly. 'I would far rather have your love than all the wealth of the world; and so, I think, would Mrs. Aspenel.'

'The first Mrs Aspenel, your mother, might, but not her you mean,' he said.

Father and daughter stood in the centre of the sumptuous apartment, the small hand of the one still resting on the arm of the other. Her face was upturned to his, and its expression was so pure, truthful, and even heavenly, that he was touched by it. He had long ceased to believe in love apart from money, but here was the precious gift offered to him, that most unselfish of all love, the filial. Why did the words, 'Without money and without price,' come into his mind? Such

phrases were but abstractions to him; still, looking down into those eyes, he realised that there were affections and self-sacrifices not to be bought with gold. Again his face softened, and Edith's heart rejoiced with a new joy, for she had never before seen a like look on his usually resolute countenance.

'Thank you, Edith,' he said; then he turned from her, and left the room.

She stood a moment bewildered. What was she to do next? She followed him at a distance, till she heard him shut his study-door after him; then she ran upstairs. Nurse True met her, telling her that her step-mother was gone quietly to bed. She had remained with her until Pauline arrived, but nothing had passed beyond the usual routine. They went to Edith's room, and Nurse True gave out her opinions, which were usually practical and sound. There were no secrets between her and Edith.

'You must be wise as the serpent, my lovey, if you are to do good between man and wife. I've often-times tried it, in our homely way, but may say I reaped the whirlwind. It must be harder work still in high places. Mrs. Aspenel's a proud, high-spirited lady, and won't bear a go-between. As to your papa, well, you must pray for God's grace to enter into his soul, and then, maybe, you may follow. Even your dear mother, my honoured mistress, could never go beyond a certain point with him; and I believe she was fond of him, and he of her, in a way. That is your best chance, deary. You are the pattern of her, and, if you can bring yourself to obey him, and never seem to go contrary to him, you may bring him round. There's more men caught by soft words than hard. If you could find out his weak point, and work your way into it, you might have a chance.'

'He has none,' sighed Edith. 'But to-

morrow is Sunday, and perhaps a quiet day of reflection may open both their hearts.'

'Let us pray for it, lovey,' said Nurse True.

CHAPTER IX.

TOO ILL TO APPEAR.

The quiet Sunday from which Edith hoped so much brought only disappointment. Mrs. Aspenel remained in her room the whole day, and refused to see anyone but Pauline. She sent word that she was too ill to appear at breakfast, and Mr. Aspenel and Edith would have passed it *tête-à-tête*, but for Bruce, who breakfasted with his parents on Sunday, when his father set aside his accounts, and became, outwardly, religious. His presence prevented any reference to the previous evening, though it did not add much to the cheerfulness of the meal. Only once Mr. Aspenel inquired

what was the matter with his wife, to which Edith replied that she had not seen her.

The trio went to church as usual, but everything seemed changed to Edith. The very sermon, she thought, was unlike Mr. Austen's usually homely and practical discourses: and the singing grated upon her. She was thinking continually of the quarrel of the night before, and her sky was entirely clouded. Mr. Harton looked moody, for he had no Fan to cheer him up; Tom glanced at her inquisitively, as if to ask for results; and Mrs. Clarville and Gerard, instead of waiting for her as they once did, evidently avoided her. Miss Vigors and Mrs. Lucy, however, remained behind to inquire for Mrs. Aspenel, and were much concerned to hear of her indisposition. So was Tom, who also waited. But Mr. Aspenel's manner was not encouraging, so the inquirers did not tarry.

After three-o'clock service, at Bruce's

earnest request, Edith took him for a walk to one of their favourite haunts on the skirts of the park. This was a tree-backed, moss-carpeted spot, where all the spring flowers grew. It was a slope from the actual parkland, and Bruce loved to climb the hillock and roll down it, as boys will. The view from it was extensive, and stretched away even to the sea, a distant strip of which was visible. It was a bright spring day, and the sun shone down upon the young green of the trees, the flower-dotted meadows, the white swans on the glassy lake, and, above all, on the brother and sister, just as if he loved them all. A garden of primroses grew all over the slope—huge roots, each a bed in itself, with blossoms enough to fill a basket; and, as the roots climbed up, one after another, they were met by a phalanx of blue hyacinths, nodding their fairy bells among the grasses. This encounter of the flowers looked almost

premeditated, and it was curious to see that here and there members of one floral army had penetrated the ranks of the other, and isolated roots of bluebells grew among the primrose-garden, and pale primroses flourished meekly among the hosts of bluebells.

Edith and Bruce were seated on a felled tree which divided these rival parterres, and were listening to the unequalled harmonies of the myriad choristers above and around them. Edith was trying to convince Bruce that the birds knew it was Sunday, and that they were singing hymns to the great Creator. She had some strange fancies bred of solitude, and soul-life and religion were to her what it should be to us all, as real as the visible world. Indeed, the seen and the unseen blended and harmonised so entirely in her mind that she scarcely knew where the one ended and the other began. Yet hers was

no dreamy or mystical faith, but palpable and practical as the two flower-worlds beneath her feet.

'Do you think the angels call to one another up in heaven, as the birds do down here?' asked Bruce, who had been trying to separate the linked choruses that echoed, jubilant from wood to wood, till all nature was alive with song.

'I daresay they do. It is a pleasant thought,' she replied.

'You and Nurse True will go to heaven, but I don't think mammy, or Janet, or I shall; and I'm sure papa won't, nor that old Tom Harton.'

'You mustn't say those things, Bruce. God only knows who are His, and all may go to Him who have faith in His dear Son.'

'That's just what Cousin Gerard told the gipsies. We aren't gipsies, you know, Edith; I s'pose we sha'n't go the same way.'

'There is only one way for rich and

poor——' began Edith, but Bruce tumbled down the slope, while she was speaking, at sight of Mrs. Clarville and Gerard, who appeared at the moment in a side-path.

Edith recognised them, and followed, but before she reached them Bruce was dragging them up the slope. They all met in slight confusion, for, in spite of their best efforts, a constraint had arisen; indeed, Edith and Gerard had not met face to face since the night of the ball. Mrs. Clarville kissed Edith affectionately, and a natural handshake between the young people set them at their ease.

'Come and rest; there is room for all,' said Edith, and her voice was so glad that Gerard's resolution faltered.

She was soon seated between mother and son, while Bruce climbed on the knees of Gerard, and at once resumed the abstruse question he had so lately propounded.

'I say, Cousin Gerard, shall we go to heaven the same way as the gipsies?

Edith says we shall, and I shouldn't like that.'

'You know who says "I am the Way." There is no other, Bruce. We must all tread it together.'

Bruce looked disappointed, but consoled himself by pouring out inquiries concerning 'that gipsy man' who beat him, Fan, and the Tigress. Edith joined in them, and Gerard had as much as he could do to ward them off, for he was himself uncertain as to their state and identity. Of Fan he knew nothing, but of Mrs. Lee and Wandering Will he had heard from time to time.

'Do you go amongst them as you used to do?' asked Edith, timidly; for she had heard of his leaving her father, but did not know the reason, or whether he had changed his abode with his position.

He told her briefly that he had continued in his old lodging in order to work

among the people who were accustomed to him; that he went easily by rail from London or Blackfriars Bridge to Victoria; and that, as Lady Ascham did not live far from the latter station, the transit was speedy. Indeed, he walked more frequently than not along the Thames Embankment and down Victoria Street to Grosvenor Gardens, where Lady Ascham lived. He said that he had got attached to his landlady and the quiet close, and, above all, to certain outcasts of the locality, and that he could not make up his mind to leave it. He liked his new work, but found it much more intricate and difficult than the more straightforward labours of Mr. Aspenel's office. He did not say that Lady Ascham was a great fidget, and, like all women in power, would have her own way; neither did he hint at his having become such a favourite with her ladyship that she would fain

have him always with her. Indeed, she had proposed his taking up his abode with her.

The quartette were heart and soul in Gerard's history when there was a sound as of some one approaching from behind. They turned involuntarily, and perceived Mr. Aspenel. Gerard was the first to rise and advance to meet him, treading down bluebells and primroses as he did so. He felt intuitively that Mr. Aspenel would fancy that he had waylaid Edith, and therefore took the initiative while that gentleman and Mrs. Clarville were going through a ceremonious greeting.

'Our meeting Miss Aspenel and Bruce was an unexpected pleasure,' he said. 'Bruce espied us down below, and dragged us up here.'

'That I did. And Cousin Gerard was telling us all about the gipsies and Lady Ascham, and lots of things. But he thinks the fellow that beat me has quite run

away. He says we must go to heaven by the same road as the gipsies. Do you think he is right, papa?'

Bruce made this rapid speech while Mr. Aspenel was shaking hands frigidly with Gerard.

'Apropos of the gipsies, Mr. Clarville,' said Aspenel, 'I should be glad to ask you one or two questions about them. Edith, you had better return to the house.'

'We can walk as far as the drive together,' said Mrs. Clarville, who did not choose Mr. Aspenel to suppose she either feared or suspected him.

Accordingly the ladies and Bruce went quickly on, and the gentlemen followed slowly.

'Have you seen anything of Wandering Will—or—or of Loveridge?' asked Mr. Aspenel. 'You and I have not met since you left me, after declining my offer of a post abroad.'

'I have seen Loveridge once or twice,

and I think I once caught sight of Wandering Will on the Common,' replied Gerard.

'Did Loveridge speak to you? Did he name me? What did he say?'

'He said he still wanted the money to emigrate, and must have it by hook or by crook. He asked me to tell you so, but I gave him to understand I was no longer in your employ.'

'Were you preaching to the set of scoundrels that congregate in Wharf Court and thereabouts?'

'I was at London Bridge, waiting for a train. He also seemed to be waiting.'

'At what hour?'

'Between five and six. I think you usually travel by that train—at least, you did until lately.'

'I sometimes drive to Charing Cross. How did the man look?'

'Very much like a gentleman; that is to say, his dress was shabby-genteel, but his manners good.'

'And Wandering Will?'

'I did not get near enough to him to accost him.'

Mr. Aspenel stood still for a few minutes, his finger on his lip, his eyes cast down, as if in deep reflection. He was, indeed, thinking how best he could convey to Gerard his intentions concerning Edith. He little thought that both Gerard and his mother fully understood him.

'Has Lady Ascham told you that there is every probability of a match between the Hon. Mr. Launceston and my daughter?' he said at last, very abruptly. 'She is on such intimate terms with Lady Beechton that she is pretty sure to have heard. After all, it is Miss Aspenel, not Janet, that he admires.'

'Lady Ascham has not mentioned the subject to me,' said Gerard, with admirable self-command.

'Oh, indeed!' ejaculated Aspenel, giving a furtive glance at Gerard.

He was composed and apparently indifferent, so the rich man was satisfied. He bade Gerard a hasty good-day, and hastened after his children, who had just parted from Mrs. Clarville. They returned to the house together, Bruce running on in front. Mr. Aspenel put several questions to Edith about his wife, mainly concerning her extravagance, but she could not answer them. He was still in great wrath, and this real or imaginary nightmare, ruin, had hold of him.

'She has run me up enormous bills everywhere,' he said; then, abruptly turning the conversation, added, 'I suppose Bruce told the truth just now, and you did not know you were to meet the Clarvilles?'

'Certainly the truth. Our meeting was accidental,' she replied, a slight flush colouring her white face.

'Let me know how Mrs. Aspenel is, and whether she means to honour us with

her company at dinner,' he said, when they reached the house.

But neither Edith nor any one save Pauline gained admission to Mrs. Aspenel. She sent word that she was too ill to see anyone. Even Bruce was sent away, when he persistently hammered at the door and called 'Let me in!' at the top of his voice. Returning to Nurse True and his tea, he announced his opinion that his mammy was not in bed at all, for there was a noise in her room, and he heard a sound like drawers and boxes being opened and shut. There was much speculation in the household about this sudden indisposition, but its cause did not transpire. Edith and Nurse True talked it over, but even they could not tell whether the hysteria of the previous night could possibly leave serious illness behind.

Dinner passed in solemn silence, and poor Edith thought she had never spent so miserable a Sunday. At dessert, however,

Bruce again broke the spell, and informed his father that "mammy wouldn't let even him into her room. He thought she must be very cross indeed, and wondered whether Tom Harton had made her angry.' Tom was certainly his *bête-noire*.

The following morning Mr. Aspenel and Edith again breakfasted alone. Mrs. Aspenel sent word that she was too ill to appear, but her husband sat grimly silent. He guessed the cause of her malady, and said within himself, 'Temper. Let it have its course,' and turned to his accounts and his newspapers.

Edith arranged his papers and watched him off as usual. He made a stiff little nod from his brougham, and her heart sank as she thought of Mrs. Aspenel. Pauline came at that moment, and said her mistress would be glad to see her; so she went at once.

CHAPTER X.

DEPARTURE OF MRS. ASPENEL AND BRUCE.

'Good-morning, Edith. I am so ill that I am going for change of air,' began Mrs. Aspenel, when Edith entered her room. 'I shall take Bruce with me, and have sent to request Nurse True to see that his things are packed up. I must have a change or I shall go out of my mind. You can tell your father that his conduct on Saturday night determined me to accept an often-repeated invitation to visit my friends in the north. I mean to send telegrams before me to announce my arrival, and so to take everyone by surprise. Don't look alarmed. There is nothing to frighten

you in my going to see my cousins and my aunts.'

If Edith did look alarmed it was not surprising, for her step-mother's room was full of boxes ready packed for her journey, and she was herself in travelling dress. This was how the previous day was occupied.

'Is not this very sudden? What will papa say?' stammered Edith.

'Close the door—bolt it—and we will talk it over,' answered Mrs. Aspenel.

This done, they sat down, and she resumed:

'Your father and I will be better apart for a while, therefore I have resolved to take my own line. I don't think he will follow me, for he will be glad of a lull for a time. We all are. I am going by the mid-day train, so there is no time to lose. Pauline and I are ready, and she is now helping to arrange Bruce's packages.'

'But Nurse True has gone to the wedding. I insisted on her going,' said terri-

fied Edith. 'Rebecca and she are such old friends that it would scarcely have been a wedding without her.'

'I had forgotten the wedding,' laughed Mrs. Aspenel. 'I hope Rebecca will be happier at sixty than I am at half her age. I will go and expedite matters myself. Come with me.'

'They went to Bruce's apartments and found the maids in much confusion, hindering one another over his wardrobe. He was with his tutor, who came punctually at ten. Edith had promised to take him to see the wedding at eleven if he behaved exceptionally well. She said so. Her step-mother replied that he would have to come with her instead, but that Edith had better go.

'You will at least let me see you off,' said the bewildered girl. 'How long will you be away? Where shall I write to you?'

'I would rather you did not come to the

station. We are only going for a visit. I will write first,' replied Mrs. Aspenel. 'Would you mind going to the study and preparing Bruce and Mr. Harton for the important event, while we finish up here. The carriage is ordered, and there is literally nothing else to do. You will take my place for a time, but, as your father and the housekeeper manage matters between them, you will fill it easily—better than its lawful occupant, probably.'

Edith obeyed passively. Bruce jumped up from his books when she appeared, with 'Is it time, Edith?' and Harton greeted her with his usual studied civility. She delivered her message. Bruce was soon consoled for one disappointment by the prospect of a journey; but Harton looked perplexed, and, for him, excited.

'You had better put by your lessons, Bruce,' he said; then, turning to Edith, asked, 'Is this consequent on last Saturday

night's—hem!—misunderstanding? Had you not better prevent it? There will certainly be a scandal.'

'There is nothing wrong in visiting one's friends,' said Edith, stiffly.

Bruce had run off while this passed, and they were alone.

'Nothing wrong under ordinary circumstances, but your domestics always know everything. If I might be so presumptuous as to advise, I would counsel you to go to the church as if nothing had happened beyond a drive. I will wait and see Mrs. Aspenel off, as if by accident, and the household will suspect nothing. It is certainly a strong proceeding.'

Edith felt like a shuttlecock tossed between two battledores, but her mind rebelled against leaving the house, and she resolved not to go to the wedding, much as she wished to be spectator of so long delayed a ceremony. She returned to Mrs. Aspenel, and Harton changed his

mind and went away. He appeared as much astonished as Edith, but he was a good actor.

She found her step-mother in her room, and again entreated to be allowed to see her off.

'If you must go!' she pleaded. 'But could you not wait till papa comes back?'

'Impossible. I should not get off at all. Fortunately I have my quarterly allowance intact, so am independent of him for travelling expenses. I shall go first to my trustee's, Sir James Whalley, and thence make a round of visits. You look scared, Edith. One would think that I was running away under suspicious circumstances. Here are my keys, such, at least, as you may want. You have always been good to me, Edith, but Janet and I could never get on together—I mean, have not hitherto.'

'She thought you so kind when she was here at Christmas,' pleaded Edith.

'One swallow does not make spring; but

we need not discuss Janet. I have had a wretched life, and want change. Edith, do not marry for money, or rank, or anything but love. I married gold, and it proves dross; yet its chains hang about me and enslave me, so that I cannot emancipate myself.'

'Poor papa! It is he who needs emancipation. Perhaps you could free him if you had patience.'

Mrs. Aspenel laughed bitterly and scornfully, and concluded the short argument by leaving the room. Her plans had been so well matured, and carried out by Pauline during the previous day, that she seemed to have little more to do. At half-past eleven the carriage was at the door. The hall was filled with packages, and Pauline was awaiting her mistress, dressed for a journey. Edith and Bruce came downstairs, the former in tears, the latter in all the excitement of buoyant childhood.

They went into the breakfast-room, where Bruce tried to console his sister by assuring her that he would write to her and bring her back a present. She, with a presentiment of evil strong upon her, could only bid him be a good boy, and take care of his mother.

When Mrs. Aspenel joined them, fully equipped for travelling, and looking very handsome in a well-be-feathered bonnet and sealskin jacket, she reproached Edith for her folly in crying for so insignificant a cause.

'One would think we were going away for ever,' she said, jauntily, while Bruce clung to Edith with real affection.

'It seems so sudden!' sobbed Edith, unable to control her emotion, and not venturing to say more, because the door was open and the servants in the hall.

Mrs. Aspenel embraced her with more warmth than usual, took Bruce by the hand, and hurried to the carriage. She

followed her to the hall-door, and stood, a solitary figure on the topmost of the broad flight of steps that terminated in the drive. She watched the carriage drive off and saw its occupants kiss their hands to her in a sort of dream. The sun shone down upon her slight figure, and turned her fair hair into golden threads; the spring breezes moved the folds of her light dress, and played among the laces that encircled her white throat and hands; and her small, almost childish form seemed out of place there, beneath the stone portico of the great house. Still she remained watching the carriage till it was out of sight, when she turned slowly, remounted the broad oaken staircase, and went to the old school-room which she had shared with Janet and Bruce. She was, indeed, alone. Not even a Nurse True was there to comfort and advise. What could she do in this emergency? She knelt down, folded her hands, and prayed.

Meanwhile Mrs. Aspenel was driving past the church.

'There they are, mammy. Look!' shouted Bruce.

A sober and almost Quaker-like procession emerged from the church porch, walked down the path, and passed under the lych-gate just as the carriage was driving by. This was the wedding to which Nurse True had gone. It will be remembered that Miss Lorne, the oldest inmate of the Cottages, died a little before the previous Christmas, leaving her old and faithful servant Rebecca behind her. So long as the mistress who had brought her up lived, Rebecca refused to marry; and this was the romance in which Janet had always been interested; but, when Miss Lorne died, her lover of forty years' standing would brook no further delay.

Of his own accord, the coachman drew up to let the bridal-party file past. The constant blacksmith, with his Rebecca on

his arm, came first. Happiness is happiness, whether at sixteen or sixty, and they were made happy at last. They were bride and bridegroom just as much as if she had been young and draped in white veil and satin instead of dark brown silk; and Mrs. Aspenel shuddered as she remembered her own orange blossoms. Next came Nurse True, attired in sober grey, and arm-in-arm with a respectable tradesman; then followed the five handmaidens of the ladies of the Cottages with suitable partners. Mrs. Clarville's Miranda was conspicuous for her smart attire, and her attendant swain looked proud of her. But the crowning honour and glory of the occasion was yet in the background. This was the five ladies, who had come in a body to the church to see the faithful Rebecca wed. They were dressed in their best, and the now empty cottages were well represented.

'Drive on,' said Mrs. Aspenel, imperatively.

Her heart was not so light as Rebecca's, and when the church bells pealed out, and the villagers shouted, it seemed to sink within her. What a contrast! Here was love and constancy rewarded after many waiting years; hard-working people about to end a hard-working life together. And she!

'Drive faster; we shall lose the train,' she cried. And soon they reached the station.

'There is Mr. Tom Harton! I hope he isn't going with us,' exclaimed Bruce.

'This is kind,' said Mrs. Aspenel, as Harton helped her out of the carriage.

'I thought I might be of use,' he said. 'I hope you will not be long absent,' he added, as they stood awaiting the train.

'*Qui sait?* I do not?' she replied, with an attempt at careless gaiety.

'You will let me know, on Bruce's account as well as my own. A sudden inter-

ruption to study is ruinous at his age.'

'I will keep you *au courant*. I daresay we shall soon be back,' she returned, looking up at his handsome but rather enigmatical face.

The train arrived, and he saw them off. He knew that the tickets were taken for Victoria Station, London, and reflected on the events of the previous evening.

Nurse True had seen Mrs. Aspenel, Bruce, Pauline, and the luggage, and had wondered, in vulgar parlance, at 'what was up.' She also missed her dear Edith from amongst the spectators of the wedding. That she was left alone at the Park was evident, and she grew uneasy. Seeing Mrs. Clarville, she slipped away from the 'best man,' and asked that lady if she would go to the Park, and ascertain what had happened.

'I cannot leave Rebecca just directly, ma'am,' said Nurse True, 'but, if Miss

Aspenel should be ill, I should never forgive myself for coming to the wedding at all.'

'I will go,' replied Mrs. Clarville; and the sedate bridesmaid returned to her place in the procession.

Mrs. Clarville rejoined her friends, and they walked towards the Cottages, while the others went straight to the faithful blacksmith's comfortable house, where a sumptuous repast was spread. He had it all his own way at last.

'I'm glad they're married, poor things, and hope they'll make the most of their ten years, at best, of matrimonial bliss. But what fools people are!' said Miss Vigors, in her most resolute of voices.

'Where can Mrs. Aspenel be going? she had luggage enough for a twelvemonth,' put in Mrs. Lucy.

'Poor Miss Aspenel has quite deserted us of late. I hope she isn't set up by all this gaiety and grandeur,' said Miss

Lilyton, in her most sentimental voice.

'Fiddle-de-dee! Depend upon it, Mr. Aspenel has forbidden her visits,' put in Miss Short, stumping along with her walking-stick. 'He hasn't entered into society for nothing.'

'I am glad we have such a glorious day,' exclaimed Mrs. Clarville, to turn the conversation.

It was a glorious day, and our first parents, in their paradisaical hymen, could scarcely have had nature in more 'sweet accord' than had the elderly couple who were just made man and wife. It was as if the heavens, earth, and distant sea smiled upon this consummation of love and constancy. And truly they are gifts 'blessed of the Lord.'

Mrs. Clarville found Edith as we left her. Knowing that she must be alone somewhere, she told the man that she would seek her; and went direct to the whilom school-room, thence to her bed-

room. She felt that something unusual must have occurred, and used no ceremony.

'Dear child, what is the matter?' she asked, when a scarcely audible 'Come in!' answered her tap at the door. 'Nurse True sent me here.'

'Oh, I am glad!' cried Edith, casting her arms round her friend. 'Everybody has gone, and I know not what to do or say.'

Mrs. Clarville soothed her, and with kindly tact sympathised with her without exactly knowing on what grounds. They went into the pretty morning-room, once the school-room, and sat down side by side on a couch near the open window, much as Mrs. Clarville and her son were wont to sit. Hand in hand they remained a few moments silent, as if listening to the choruses of the birds, and gazing on the cloudless sky. Then Edith regained her composure, and told her friend as much as she deemed right of what had occurred.

'It may be nothing, after all,' she said; 'but Mrs. Aspenel has never before left the Park for more than a few days; and I do not know what to say to my father.'

'You can only tell him the exact truth,' returned Mrs. Clarville, who considered the matter serious, though she did not say so to Edith. 'Your duty is clear. You can only make the best of it to your father, and cleave to him.'

Mrs. Clarville knew full well what her words meant, and the difficulties involved in them. She did not hesitate to advise the motherless girl, or to remain with her, despite Mr. Aspenel's rather strong hints that her presence was not desirable at the Park. She stayed, indeed, to luncheon, and subsequently to afternoon-tea, comforting Edith as no one else could. She spoke naturally, if incidentally, of Gerard, and did not allow it to appear that any actual prohibition was laid upon their friendship; and she finally took the lonely

girl to her heart, and told her that she was ready to aid or come to her at a moment's notice. She only left her when Nurse True returned, and Mr. Aspenel was momentarily expected; and she left her strengthened and consoled.

CHAPTER XI.

JACK.

Mr. Aspenel returned late, and hurried at once to his room. Edith did not, therefore, see him until a few moments before dinner.

'Where is Mrs. Aspenel?' he asked.

'She is not coming to dinner. Perhaps you will not name her absence before the servants,' stammered Edith.

He took the hint, and they went in to dinner, at which he both ate and drank freely. Very few words passed between them, but when the servants left the room Edith began her difficult task as simply and naturally as she could. Before doing

so, she took a seat at her father's side.

'Mrs. Aspenel has gone on a visit to her friends in the north,' she began, her voice trembling slightly.

'The north! When? How?'

'She left by the mid-day train. She said she was going first to Sir James Whalley's, and then on to her other relations. I was to tell you that——'

'Tell me! You! What right had she to go without my permission? How dare she send a message by you to me? What reasons did she give?'

'That she was ill and wanted change; and that what passed between you and her on Saturday made her resolve to accept an oft-repeated invitation to her friends.'

As Edith said this as bravely as she could, she saw that her father's face assumed an expression of extreme malignancy, such as she had never witnessed before, and from which she shrank in terror. He struck the table heavily, and,

with a sort of remorseless calm, said, with the addition of what sounded much like an oath,

'She has taken her line; let her keep to it. She need never come back again. She has nearly ruined me, and I hate the sight of her!'

'Oh, papa! you should not say that!' rejoined Edith, involuntarily.

'Why not? She returns the compliment,' he said, grimly, laughing as if it were a good joke. 'Where is Bruce?'

'He has gone with her.'

Now the suppressed passion broke forth. He rose, stamped his foot, uttered words not to be transcribed, paced the room, almost hissed in his fury, and finally grasped Edith's shoulder so cruelly that she cried out another 'Oh, papa!' He let her go, but turned his rage upon her.

'Why did you allow her to take Bruce? You ought to have withstood her. Where was Tom Harton? You should have

sent for him, and between you have detained the boy. Bruce! my only son —my—my—heir! No, not that exactly. I want no heirs. Where was Tom Harton, I ask?'

'He was here. But he had no power, nor had I.'

'Here! What do you all mean? A conspiracy; a plot to rob me. I daresay you have rifled my drawers, my—my safe. Ring the bell. We will have Harton here. Send for Mr. Tom Harton immediately.'

The last clause was to the man who answered the bell.

'No one has robbed you, papa,' interposed Edith. 'Mrs. Aspenel said her last quarter's allowance would suffice for travelling expenses. Besides, it is easy to write and recall her.'

'I don't want her, but she shall not have Bruce. The law would forbid. Come with me and be witness if she has rifled my drawers—my cash-box.'

She followed him to his study, the scene of the quarrel. She had recovered her self-control, and stood by while he examined drawers and cupboards, which he found intact. There was a ponderous-looking safe in one corner of the apartment, at which Edith had sometimes wondered. It was really an iron safe, well cased in mahogany to match the other cupboards. In trying the lock of this he partially unclosed its door, which he shut again rapidly with a bang, but not so instantly as to prevent Edith's seeing what seemed to her a lining of gold.

'That will do. I shall examine the other rooms to-morrow,' he said, casting a sinister glance at his daughter.

'Papa, you cannot believe that I would rob you,' she said, going towards him with a courage that was not her own. 'I do not care for riches. They seem to me burdens while we live, and chains when we die.'

'Die!' he exclaimed, as if stung by her words. 'Who thinks of death? Go, and come to me again when I have questioned Tom Harton.'

She left him, and went to Nurse True. Tom Harton arrived shortly after, and was shown into the study, where Aspenel awaited him. He had resumed his usual manner when Harton entered and addressed him with cold formality.

'It is strange that you should have allowed your pupil to be taken from you in the midst of his studies without my consent.'

'I took it for granted it was with your consent, since he accompanied Mrs. Aspenel,' replied Tom, with finished *sang-froid.* 'I even went to see him off, thinking you would like me to do so. He was making such progress that I regretted exceedingly the interruption. But I suppose it will not be for long.'

'You will, of course, fill up the term

when he returns?' said Aspenel, with an eye to business, in spite of his wife.

'That depends. You know the workman is worthy of his hire, and it is not my fault that he left. However, I leave that little matter to you. I am surprised that you were not aware of his holiday.'

'Could you declare on your oath that you knew nothing of this journey?' asked Aspenel, turning his inquisitive little eyes suddenly on Harton. 'You and Mrs. Aspenel seemed on singularly good terms.'

'Positively nothing. How should I, when it was so sudden that even you seem taken by surprise? Mrs. Aspenel did not name it when I saw her last on Saturday night.'

Tom Harton perceived that there was a lurking suspicion in Aspenel's mind, and he set himself to work to dispel it. A white lie more or less did not weigh on his conscience, and his aim was to divert all suspicion from himself.

'Ah! you dined here on Saturday?' suggested Aspenel.

'Yes; and saw Mrs. Aspenel just before I left. She came, I think, from a private interview with you, and appeared excited. But she merely wished me good-night, as usual. I remarked that she was not at church yesterday, and feared illness. I take it for granted she was preparing for her journey, but was surprised at its suddenness and that she should have taken Bruce without giving me notice. I am still more surprised that you should have been equally in the dark. But ladies like to astonish us of the weaker sex. Man was created for submission.'

Mr. Aspenel did not like the tone of this speech, half wary, half satirical, but he felt the necessity of maintaining the friendship, such as it was, that had sprung up between them. He changed his own manner fron caution to confidence.

'The fact is,' he said, 'that Mrs. Aspenel

is ruining me by extravagance, and we had a few words on Saturday when I spoke to her about it. My losses have been enormous lately, and I feel that we must retrench. Yes, retrench! You look surprised, but trade is at a standstill. I suppose Mrs. Aspenel took offence, and took herself off. Her predecessors would not have thought of such a proceeding. Number one was too gentle, number two too proud, but number three has the temper of a gorgon. Ha, ha! I wouldn't advise you to marry more than once. Three wives are a mistake.'

'I am not likely to do so,' replied Harton, echoing the unnatural laugh, and shrewdly suspecting that Aspenel had drunk too much wine.

Not too much, however, to cloud his business capacity, for all of a sudden he proposed to Harton to pay him his salary up to the morning of Bruce's departure. But Tom Harton was as shrewd, if not as

niggardly as he, and politely declared that he preferred waiting until the end of the term, adding that he would take a quarter's notice from that day, if Mr. Aspenel wished to discontinue his services.

'It will be better for all parties to let it be understood that Mrs. Aspenel has taken Bruce to see his relations,' he said, diplomatically. 'If I am dismissed, of course people will say that there is something amiss.'

'But they needn't know it,' put in Aspenel.

'I should be compelled to make it public, because I must look out for another tutorship. Besides, we don't reckon by days, but by terms, in scholastics.'

Harton had the best of it, in spite of the frown on his companion's brow. But he must dispel this frown at all risks, for he was far-seeing, and thought a great deal of Mr. Aspenel's daughters. He began upon the gipsies. He said he believed he had seen

Wandering Will hovering about that very morning. It was strange that none of the tribe had appeared since Fan left.

Mr. Aspenel forgot his other grievances, and when Tom took his leave he appeared to be more concerned about getting rid of his enemies, the Egyptians, than conciliating his domestic foes.

Mr. Tom Harton's home-life had not been rosy since the disappearance of poor Fan, attributed by his father to his severity. As he walked towards home beneath a sky studded by moon and stars, instead of taking a short-cut, he extended his walk through the Park, to the principal entrance opposite the Cottages. But for his ulterior views, he would have let Mr. Aspenel 'pay him up,' and again left home and his father's reproachful glances. But Edith and Janet, to say nothing of Mrs. Aspenel, were chains of gold, not unlike those forged by the millionaire. Janet had loved him, he knew, ever since she

was a child; but, in spite of this and her beauty, he preferred Edith; and she was unapproachable, though gentle and timid as the white rabbit that suddenly crossed his path.

Sounds of merriment greeted him as he got into the road. They proceeded from members of the wedding-party, and he stood a few minutes to listen to their discourse. The five domestics of the Cottages were bidding good-night to the beaux who had escorted them home, and were so hilarious that Tom almost wished he had been at the wedding.

'Which of us 'll be the next, I wonder?' said one.

'Never too late, anyhow,' said another.

'Your turn next, Susan. You ain't anigh so old as Rebecca, and Miss Short a' got over ten years to come up wi' Miss Lorne,' said a third.

'I think it'll be Miranda,' whispered a swain.

'Who've adone for the old ladies all day?' said a fourth.

'We've took it by turns, and run to an' fro, and they've been uncommon good-natured. But then there was nobody like Rebecca.'

'Dree more cheers for her and George,' cried a swain; and Mr. Tom Harton left them cheering, while he pursued his way, reflecting on many things.

He found Hoplands exteriorly more cheerful than usual, for there were lights flitting about, both upstairs and down. He heard his father's voice, and it was so cheery that he took it for granted that either the rector or Miss Vigors was with him. He listened, for he did not feel in a mood for either. However, he went in. The visitor's back was towards him.

'Here's Tom at last,' said his father.

'And here's Jack,' shouted the guest, jumping up, and hugging Tom like a young bear.

'My dear fellow, where did you spring from?' asked Tom, as soon as he had regained his suppressed breath.

'I hail from Canada West,' replied Jack, through his nose.

'Shake hands, old boy. I am so glad you have come home,' cried Tom, half shaking Jack's hand off; for if there was anything on earth Tom Harton loved it was this brother Jack.

And no wonder, for a brighter, manlier, happier specimen of the Anglo-Saxon was never born into this mongrel country of ours. Fair curly hair, fair bushy beard, laughing blue eyes, clear, musical voice, fine muscular figure, and, above all, a heart overflowing with love for all mankind, and you have Jack Harton. If he was wild, he was not wicked; if brave, he was no bully. He had been the light of his mother's life, the apple of his father's eye. Mr. Harton forgot rheumatism, and moved about with the activity of youth, ordering

the servants to bring in every dainty the house contained, and emptying the side-board of all its drinkables.

'You are killing the fatted calf, father,' said Jack. 'But I haven't been a bad boy like the prodigal, and I haven't got an envious brother.'

'Then we'll make merry with a good conscience,' said Mr. Harton, as a steaming and savoury dish came in.

But Tom's conscience was burdened by Fan, whom he knew his brother loved as a sister, and for whom he had not asked. He was some few years older than Jack, one brother and a sister, who died young, having been born between them. But Jack was twenty-four, and looked older than his age. He was personally like his father, and they resembled one another also in qualities of the heart.

When supper was over, and the trio drew round the fire, it soon evolved why Jack had not named Fan. He and his

father took the 'calumet of peace,' but Tom was no smoker, and thus spake Jack.

'I shouldn't have been home so soon but for Fan. I am come to find her, and, if she is in Old England, I will. When your letter came I was dumbfoundered, for I knew something awful must have happened to make her run away. She hasn't gone off with a man, take my word for that. I only waited to set my affairs to rights, and hear if you had found her; and here I am. I knew that you were ever so long before you told me, father, by a slip you made in one of your letters, and Tom didn't even mention her. That was cruel, Tom, for, if you never loved her, I did. There is only one Fan in the wide world; I have never seen anybody like her at home or abroad: so handsome, so generous, so affectionate, so unselfish. Have you, father?'

'Never.'

The warm-hearted fellow's voice was

choked by feeling, and Mr. Harton's 'never' came out with a resolution that made Tom start. Indeed, Tom was very uncomfortable, though Mr. Harton studiously avoided compromising him with his brother. He had, however, to listen to questions and answers concerning Fan until he could bear it no longer, and said that he would go and look after Jack's room and belongings, while the others finished up their pipes and Fan.

CHAPTER XII.

JACK IN LONDON.

Mr. Harton and his son Jack had much to say to one another. They had been separated two or three years, and their joy was great at reunion. Like many other young men, Jack's mind had been always bent on emigration, and his father had helped him to emigrate. He had been tolerably successful, and, although he was not yet even on the road to making a fortune, he was making a livelihood, which was something. He had worked a year or more as labourer on other men's estates, had learnt farming, and had purchased government land, which he was industriously clearing.

'Any man with health, a will, and a pair of hands can do this,' he said. 'But I expected to do it all at once, and be rich in no time. It is the loneliness that kills one, and, when I heard that Fan was missing, I was ready to throw it all up in despair.'

'Why Fan?' asked Mr. Harton.

'Because I meant to come home and marry her as soon as I had a hut to put her in. She was born to be an emigrant's wife, father, and out in the far West nobody would twit her with her gipsy origin. She knew nothing of my intentions, only, I take it, guessed that I loved her.'

'And what was to become of me, Jack, without Fan? You young folks never think of the loneliness of your elders, only of society for yourselves,' laughed Mr. Harton.

'Well, father, you have Tom and Miss Vigors!' replied Jack, breaking out into an

honest 'haw-haw,' which delighted his father.

'Miss Vigors has been my only comfort, you bad boy. If you carry off Fan, I shall give you a step-mother.'

'Poor Fan—dear Fan—where shall we find her?' asked Jack, his joyous laugh turned into a sepulchral monotone.

'You and Gerard Clarville must put your heads together, and I have no doubt you will trace her if she is to be traced. What her reason for running away was, I can't imagine. I suppose she had one.'

Mr. Harton was tempted to mention Tom's share in that inauspicious event, but refrained, anxious to maintain the friendship of the brothers. Gerard's name set Jack on another track, and he soon resolved to seek him as speedily as possible. It never entered Mr. Harton's head to discourage the search because of Jack's avowed intention to wed Fan if he found her; on the contrary, the kind, unconven-

tional man did his best to encourage his son, and to bid him Godspeed in a chase that had brought him from Canada to his native land.

'It is good to be here, father,' said Jack, when Tom returned and said it was long past bed-time. 'Home's home; yet it doesn't seem home without Fan.'

A twinge of Tom's elastic conscience made him hurry his relatives off to bed. Tom was a wonderful organiser, and could manage everybody's affairs, except perhaps Fan's.

Jack did not allow the grass to grow under his feet. The following day he was off to London, and found Gerard's lodging in the close with some difficulty. The landlady told him that Gerard was at his work at Lady Ascham's, and must not be disturbed. She evidently thought him one of the many suspicious characters that inquired for her lodger from time to time.

'I am an old friend, ma'am,' said Tom.

'Why, this can't be London? It is almost as quiet as the prairies. But the air isn't quite as clear and fresh. Would you oblige me with Mr: Clarville's address?'

Jack's honest face and exuberant manner conquered Mrs. Pottle, and she gave the address, warning him, at the same time, not to intrude on Mr. Clarville.

'Her ladyship's a deal more particular than even Mr. Aspenel was, and that fussy, I should say, that she don't like no interruption. Poor Mr. Clarville a' had enough to put up with in his situations: but he's a saint, he is, and I says he ought to be—what d'ye call it, as they do to saints when they die?'

'Canonised?' suggested Jack. 'Only he isn't dead yet.'

'That's the word. Canonised. The Lord preserve him, I says; and a-many more'll say the same. But, when I'm canonised, I'll ask the Pope o' Rome to do it afore I die.'

'So will I. Which is the best way to Grosvenor Gardens?' said Jack.

Mrs. Pottle gave him minute directions, which he followed with some difficulty, reflecting, *en route*, that, if the close was prairie-like, London outside it was certainly not.

When he reached his destination, having no card, he scrawled 'Jack Harton' on a piece of paper, and sent it to Gerard by the elegant gentleman who opened the door to him. The words are not used inadvertently, for Lady Ascham's footman had once had some pretensions to gentility, and had been condescending enough to accept her situation with the proviso that he should not appear in livery. Your impecunious individuals are often difficult to deal with even by the most philanthropic; and Lady Ascham sometimes found her establishment hard to manage. It was composed of somewhat heterogeneous individuals culled from Homes and Refuges.

Jack was at once ushered into one of the ground-floor sitting-rooms, converted into an office for Gerard's work. He was there, surrounded by books and papers, and received Jack with the utmost cordiality. They were fond of one another, though there were several years between them; indeed, Gerard had been of use to Jack in many ways, and was looked up to accordingly by the younger man. Influence is one of the mainsprings of life, example another.

Jack soon told his story, and Gerard was instantly heart and soul in it. He was himself fond of Fan, but even his philanthropy would not have carried him to Canada in search of her.

'We must first hunt down Mrs. Lee. You remember the old Tigress, Jack?' said Gerard, who had been long striving to discover her wherabouts.

'I should think I did, and she me, for we were sworn foes. I used to torment

the life out of her, and her language was not always the choicest.'

'She is, I believe, really a changed character, and has learnt to "bridle her tongue." If anyone knows about Fan she does, though when I once stumbled upon her by chance she declared she did not.'

'Where is she to be found? Let us go at once.'

Jack started to his feet. The door opened, and he was confronted by Lady Ascham, a bundle of letters in her hand.

'Gerard, what am I to do?' she began, with a sort of wail; but perceiving a stranger she bowed and stood aside.

'Lady Ascham, Mr Tom Harton,' said Gerard. 'A son of Mr. Harton, of whom you have heard me speak as the friend of the young girl who disappeared from Roselands last Christmas.'

'Yes, I remember. Have you found her?' asked Lady Ascham, holding out her hand to Jack.

'I wish we had, with all my heart. I am come over from Canada to search for her,' replied Jack.

'Something to do with the gipsies, I think. Am I right, Gerard? Oh! then we are much interested in Mr. Smith's efforts to bring them under religious and educational influences. He has already done wonders, and will probably succeed in obtaining an Act of Parliament for their benefit and that of other outsiders.'

'Oh! Fan don't want an Act of Parliament, and is sufficiently well educated,' put in Jack, half offended. 'She is like my sister, you know; and my father looks on her as a daughter.'

'I understand, and I was not alluding to her as an individual, but to the gipsies as a class. If I can help to find her, I shall be only too glad. I know Mr. Smith personally, and am on the committee. You must see into it at once, Gerard.'

Gerard smiled. He had such a multi-

tude of things to see into, that if he had a hundred eyes he could not have examined them all. He liked his new work, but could never get it done; for no sooner had he finished one of Lady Ascham's 'imperative cases,' than fifty others cropped up. However, he felt inspired to new energy for Jack and Fan, and Lady Ascham was soon so deeply interested in them that hopeful Jack delighted her by his enthusiastic thanks. In short, the whole gipsy world was to be moved until some revulsion brought back the truant.

Jack stayed to luncheon, during which meal Gerard told Lady Ascham that he had just received a note from Mr. Aspenel, requesting him to call at his office.

'He wants you back again!' cried her ladyship, in affright. 'You won't leave me. I couldn't possibly do without you.'

'You are too good to me, and I am too well-off to wish to change. But what am I to do as regards this summons? Mr.

Aspenel asks me to call this afternoon.'

'You must go, of course. What can he want with you? But you must come back here to dinner, and to talk over that important committee meeting before I venture to attend it.'

Gerard acceded to this request. He had become almost as necessary to Lady Ascham as to his mother. Was he also a necessity to Mr. Aspenel? This question was soon answered, for immediately after luncheon he went to call upon him. He took Jack with him, telling him to wait for further orders downstairs. He wanted to send a parcel and message to his mother. He found Mr. Aspenel looking jaded and ill, to say nothing of stern and acrimonious.

'Thank you for coming,' he said, pointing to a seat. 'You left of your own free will. Have you seen anything of that fellow Loveridge? I have been receiving a sort of——well, anonymous letters, since

that last transaction which you managed for me, and I don't think he has left the country as he promised.'

'I believe, sir, he only promised on condition that you came to terms with him, whatever those terms were,' said Gerard.

'Well, if you could manage to see him and tell him that I agree to those terms, I should be much obliged to you. I have no one I can trust; absolutely no one I can trust. You made a mistake in leaving me.'

'I could not go abroad, and you filled up my place here.'

'You can resume it if you like.'

This was said with a furtive glance at Gerard, who was shaken for the moment. But he could not play at fast-and-loose, if Aspenel could.

'I fear that would be impossible now, sir,' he said. 'I am pledged to Lady Ascham for the present.'

'A foolish old woman. You do not

mean to risk your chances of fortune for her philanthropic extravagances.'

'Fortune is too fickle a jade for me to run after,' replied Gerard, 'but I shall be happy to run after Loveridge for you, if he is in his old quarters. There is something in him that interests me. He looks like one of the unlucky ones who has been more sinned against than sinning.'

'What do you mean, sir?' asked Aspenel, sharply.

'Nothing more than what I say. I will try to find him and tell him what you say,' returned Gerard, quietly.

'Then would you mind transmitting him the quarterly payments? He could write to you and let you know his whereabouts, and I should wash my hands of him.'

'I could scarcely promise so much as this, because I know so little of the man; but I will try to see him, and find out exactly what he wants.'

'He wants money, money, money. He wants to bleed me, who am getting every day more and more bloodless; and, because of this, everybody conspires to ruin me. Have you heard of Mrs. Aspenel's journey to the north?'

This change of subject surprised Gerard, but as, fortunately, he had heard nothing about it, no more was said. Mr. Aspenel seemed well pleased with his ignorance.

'If you can negotiate this matter with Loveridge, and finally see him out of the country, and be assured that he will not return, I should be happy to give you something for your trouble,' he said.

'I could not receive payment for helping a fellow-creature,' returned Gerard, stiffly; but he felt amused, in spite of his annoyance, at perceiving that Aspenel was relieved by his declaration.

Volunteering to go at once, he took his leave, picked up Jack, and went his way towards Wharf Court.

Jack's amazement at the meanness, squalor, and degradation that they saw as they walked through the alleys which Gerard knew how to tread, was great. Still greater was his astonishment when he saw how warmly Gerard was welcomed by many a slatternly woman and half-naked child, as they neared their destination. He was now well-known in this locality, and had the happiness of feeling that drunkenness and immorality were abating since he had visited it. He found Lady Ascham's purse a great aid to his efforts, and was persuaded that Christian love could effect all things, if only the Christian worker could forget self.

Wharf Court looked worse by daylight than lamplight, because its accessories were more conspicuous. Rags and tatters, dirt and misery, were the prevailing features; though here and there a flowerpot in a window and a patch of whitewash gave promise of better things.

On inquiry, Gerard found that Loveridge had left the locality altogether, and that the owner of the abode where he had lodged, and who alone knew anything of him, was absent. He asked a neighbour to tell the latter that he would return about ten, and while so engaged a little crowd gathered, and Jack fancied they were about to be mobbed and robbed, as he afterwards expressed it. But all the little crowd wanted was a kind word and shake of the hand from Gerard, and one or two comforting texts to sustain their famished souls until he came again.

'We've read all your books and passed them round, please, sir: and we've been to the mission-room,' they said; and Gerard 'thanked God and took courage.'

He also slipped small coins into a few hands where he knew they were most needed, while Jack emptied his pocket, congratulating himself with the fact that he had a return-ticket.

'Suppose Fan should be reduced to this sort of thing?' he said, as he accompanied Gerard to the close. 'My belief is that she has found somebody belonging to her. But why shouldn't she have said so?'

The more he pondered, the more puzzled he became, and the more faith he put in Gerard. If only they could work together in town and country, he felt sure he should find her.

'Can your landlady give me a room here when I want one?' he asked, while Gerard was doing up his parcel. 'I could then look all over London. She's pretty sure to be here. I'll ask her.'

Before Gerard could remonstrate, Jack was off, had found Mrs. Pottle, and had secured a small room at the top of her house.

'It is quiet enough, anyhow,' he reflected; 'and I shall be on the spot.'

Gerard found it impossible to convince him that he might live all his life in

London and never stumble on the person he wanted to meet, so he let him have his way, thankful that so cheerful a friend had been thrust upon him instead of one whom he might have liked less.

CHAPTER XIII.

NOT AT WHALLEY MANOR.

Morning after morning Edith watched and waited for her stepmother's letter, but none came. She had promised to write to her, and to give her address, but her promise was unfulfilled. She felt sure, also, that her father had received no news, and she was surprised and anxious. At last she could bear the suspense no longer, and resolved to speak to him. He had been even more reserved and unapproachable than ever since his wife's departure, and had vented his spleen on his household, retrenching this expense and complaining of that, until the servants meditated giving

notice *en masse*. In vain Nurse True tried to conciliate and Edith to reassure; discontent and anger reigned at the Park.

Over a week had elapsed, when Edith took courage and asked her father if he had heard from Mrs. Aspenel. They were at breakfast, but the post had not yet come.

'I did not expect to hear from her. I waited for you to give me information,' he replied, frigidly.

'I have had none to give. I have not heard,' she said.

He frowned and reflected; then said,

'Perhaps you will write to her at Sir James Whalley's, and say she must send Bruce home. I cannot allow him to lose more time. I will ask Mr. Tom Harton to fetch him, so that there shall be no delay beyond your letter. Mrs. Aspenel can do as she likes.'

'Perhaps there will be a letter to-day,' suggested Edith.

'We will see,' he rejoined, and turned to his accounts; then suddenly resumed, looking at her. 'You must take the management of house and servants into your hands while I am in town, until Mrs. Aspenel sees fit to return. We must draw in during her absence, and endeavour to put things on a more economical footing. You will only have to carry out my orders.'

The arrival of the post-bag rendered response unnecessary. There was no letter from Mrs. Aspenel or Bruce. Mr. Aspenel's frown deepened, until the lines on his forehead and between his eyes looked liked railway cuttings. But he made no remark. Edith gathered up his papers as usual, and, when he rose from the breakfast table, she said,

'I am afraid I cannot manage the servants in their present frame of mind, papa. Something has annoyed them and they threaten to leave.'

'Let them. There are plenty of others to be had. Your letter will reach Mrs. Aspenel to-morrow evening. You know Sir James Whalley's address. If she answers by return of post, you will hear the following day. If she does not condescend to write, let her know that Harton, or some equally trustworthy person, will fetch Bruce on Friday, bring him home on Saturday, and so enable him to begin his studies on Monday. I cannot afford to spend money without an equivalent.'

'I will write and say what you tell me, papa,' said Edith.

'Thank you. You are at least obedient,' he returned.

He was so moody that she did not venture to offer to kiss him as she sometimes did, but sighed heavily as she watched him from the window. She sought Nurse True, her only consoler in that great house, although all the servants loved her.

'What if Mrs. Aspenel should refuse to

send Bruce back?' she asked. 'Imagine the breach and scandal.'

'My deary, matters must come to a head sooner or later. Your blessed mother bore her lot like an angel; Miss Janet's mother was subdued by sickness, but the present Mrs. Aspenel has a spirit of her own, and, I fear, won't submit any longer. But you had best advise her to let Bruce come without resisting, and to return herself as soon as she conveniently can. You can say that the servants rebel, and she only can keep the household together. Say that I will do my best for Master Bruce—say anything for peace.'

Edith wrote her letter without delay, and followed Nurse True's advice. She worded it as discreetly as possible, and entreated for an answer by return of post. She was very restless all that day and could scarcely fill in her diary for Janet. Doing so, however, she felt thankful that her sister was absent, and not, therefore, oppressed

by the anxiety that filled her mind. She read and re-read Janet's last letters, which were full of bright and encouraging matter; but she had not heard from her since Mrs. Aspenel's departure, and longed for her opinion on so uncommon a proceeding. It was Tuesday, and she almost counted the hours that must intervene between her letter and the reply.

She need not have worried her mind, for no reply came. Three posts and not a line from Mrs. Aspenel. On the third morning her father was furious, but with a concentrated fury that found no vent.

'Tom Harton is only waiting for orders,' he said, with tone and manner that frightened Edith. 'He will be here almost immediately, and is ready to start for his journey. I have given him his instructions. He is to bring back Bruce.'

'Suppose Mrs. Aspenel should refuse to let him come,' said Edith, timidly.

'Refuse! She dare not. I should send

my lawyer.' He left the room and went to the library, where, as he expected, he found Tom Harton.

'Can you start immediately?' he began, in breathless anger. 'I saw your valise in the hall, and can take you to the station. You can reach the Manor this evening, see Mrs. Aspenel, and bring off Bruce to-morrow. She knows you are coming. She expects you, in short.'

'Does she acquiesce in your plan?' asked Tom, who, in his wish to inform himself concerning Mrs. Aspenel, had willingly undertaken the journey.

'Of course she does,' replied Aspenel, evasively, for he had not told Harton the whole truth; he had only intrusted him with the care of Bruce.

Having his own views, Tom Harton did not press his inquiries, but set off with Aspenel for the station.

Edith was consoled by a long letter from Janet. It began with 'Hurrah!

So Mrs. Aspenel has broken loose at last. The caged lioness has rent her bars, and taken her cub with her. I hope she will enjoy herself.' It went on to discuss the *pros* and *cons* of this event, and contained, besides, the usual school-gossip. Janet was working with a will, and meant to astonish her admirers by her accomplishments as well as her beauty. She discussed the return of Jack and the marriage of Rebecca. 'I would have given all my pocket-money and jewels—worth, perhaps, a pound or so—to have seen Rebecca married,' she said. 'I admire constancy above anything, though I could never be constant except to you. *Entre nous*, Jack was devoted to Fan, and perhaps he has come back in search of her.'

'How romantic she is,' exclaimed Nurse True, when Edith read her the letter. 'I hope she won't commit any folly herself. I've no opinion of foreign parts, and wish Lady Ascham had recommended an honest

Englishwoman instead of a French one.'

The day wore through. Edith gave her orders quietly to the servants, backed by Nurse True, but she seemed to feel a certain underground rumbling indicative of an earthquake. Mr. Aspenel had offended them all, individually and collectively, by bringing them to book concerning those bills which had caused his quarrel with his wife, and they 'were not forced to stop, if Mrs. Aspenel was,' they muttered. He was particularly aggressive the next day which was Saturday. He did not go to town, but amused himself, instead, by roaming over his premises and parks, finding fault with everything and everybody. The burden of his song was that people were conspiring to ruin him.

Edith did her best to calm and please him. He was fond of music, so he had a soul somewhere—'for melody, if not for harmony,' as Mrs. Aspenel once said. Edith told him at dinner that she had a

new and pretty song, and asked him to hear it. He complied, and they went together to the drawing-room. He sat down not far from the piano, but he was soon on his feet again extinguishing some of the lights, which he said were unnecessary for two people. He left those on the piano, and the big room looked dark and sepulchral in its far-off corners. He himself looked gloomier still, and Edith was almost frightened by the unrelenting expression of his face. She had a sweet, sympathetic voice, and the new song contained no obnoxious allusions to love or matrimony, so he listened till his countenance cleared somewhat. She sang another and another, when she was surprised by a sort of groan. Looking round, she saw that her father had fallen asleep, and the unpleasant sound proceeded from him. The tension of his features had relaxed, and they looked regular and handsome. She played on softly, accompanied by

occasional mutterings from him, until the door was opened, and Mr. Tom Harton announced.

Aspenel started up, Edith moved towards him.

'Where is Bruce?' asked the former.

'I am very sorry, but he was not at Whalley Manor. I could not bring him,' replied Harton, with hesitation for so self-possessed a man.

'Not at the Manor! Where is he then? What did Mrs. Aspenel say?'

'I did not see her. She is not at the Manor either.'

The hesitation increased, and Aspenel exclaimed,

'What does all this mean? Speak out, man. Do you think anything you can say will trouble me?'

'Do sit down. You look tired,' put in Edith, and Harton seated himself near Edith opposite Aspenel, the two candles dimly giving light to the trio.

He did look both tired and worried, but he rallied himself, and started on his theme abruply.

'I reached the Manor about seven o'clock last night. I found that Sir James and Lady Whalley were from home, and the house undergoing that abomination, a spring-cleaning. I inquired for Mrs. Aspenel, and the answer was that she had not been there. One or two letters had arrived addressed to her, which had been forwarded to Lady Whalley, and that was all they knew about her. I saw the housekeeper, who had not heard that Mrs. Aspenel was expected, but would make inquiries of her ladyship. In, short I went on a fool's errand, for neither telegram nor other announcement had reached the Manor of Mrs. Aspenel's visit, and Bruce, whom I was to fetch away, was unknown even by name. I got a bed at the "Whalley Arms" in the village, and made further inquiries, but all I could get in reply was

that 'no gentlefolk had been that way for over a fortnight, for the house was a-painting and a-papering.' It was evident that, as Sir James and Lady Whalley had been away more than that period, Mrs. Aspenel could not have been on a visit to them, so I thought my only plan was to return here, and tell you of my unsuccessful quest.'

When Tom Harton paused in his rapid speech, he did not venture to look at Mr. Aspenel; but Edith did. He was deadly pale, and his face was almost diabolical in its suppressed frenzy. He did not speak; he could not apparently, neither could she. But Harton both could and did. He suggested that Mrs. Aspenel had probably gone to other friends when she found that the Whalleys were absent, and offered his services again, should anyone be required to fetch Bruce. But he was overshooting his mark. His proposal was met by a curse—short, low, emphatic—which

made Edith start, shuddering, towards her father, and caused Harton to look the deceived man in the face at last. There was not time even for a second glance, for Aspenel rose and left the room. He staggered slightly as he moved, and Edith followed: but scarcely was she in the passage leading to his study, when she heard the door shut with a tremendous bang, and knew that she was excluded. She returned to Harton. Whom else could she consult? He alone was in the secret, and through circumstances knew more than anyone else of the quarrel that had caused this painful flight, if flight it was.

'What can I do?' she asked.

'You can write to Lady Whalley and make inquiries,' he replied. 'But I do not think Mrs. Aspenel intends her whereabouts to be known. We all want a holiday now and then, and she has managed hers admirably.'

Edith felt the bitter sarcasm of his tone, and fancied there was personal pique beneath. She knew that her step-mother had made a friend and partial confidant of him, and judged rightly that he was annoyed at having been left in the dark. This did not, however, interfere with his desire to make himself necessary to Edith.

'How can we prevent the scandal—the gossip?' she asked, nervously.

'They have merely gone on a visit to friends. There is nothing scandalous in that,' he replied, cynically.

'No. But, if they do not return, that farce cannot be maintained; and my father may resort to extreme measures.'

'Extreme measures are expensive. I scarcely think you need fear that. But I have some worldly experience, and am at your service in any way.'

He tried to resume his usual insinuating manner, but could not get rid of some

sort of under-stream of annoyed humiliation. He hated to be baffled. It was all one to him that Mr. Aspenel should be infuriated, provided he had not been his tool. Edith asked if he had dined, or if she might order refreshments, or what she could do to atone for his fruitless errand. He said he would go home to supper, as his brother would be looking for him.

'Had I better try to see my father?' asked Edith.

'I think not. He will be here to-morrow, and you will see by his manner what plan to pursue. I will call after church on some excuse or other. Church! Whatever happens, we must keep up appearances, and I daresay Mr. Aspenel will. Good-evening.'

Fortunately for Edith, Nurse True was a better adviser than Tom Harton, and she counselled her to go to her father. She went, and knocked at the study-door. The

'Who's there?' assured her that nothing particular had happened.

'It is I, papa; Edith,' she said. 'I came to ask if I could do anything for you.'

'Nothing, thank you;' and somehow the brief reply reassured her.

CHAPTER XIV.

EDITH'S RESPONSIBILITIES.

Tom Harton was right. Mr. Aspenel kept up appearances. He went to church as usual, and, as far as Edith could discover, was unmoved by the events of the previous day. He scarcely spoke at breakfast, and did not allude to them in the few words he said. He looked morose and moody enough, and Edith could not help contrasting his face as she had seen it in repose the previous night, with the hard, inflexible face of that Sunday morning. Although the sermon was on the text 'God is love,' the rector's tender address had apparently no effect on him. After service, to Edith's sur-

prise, he said he wished to speak to Mrs. Clarville and her son, and hurried to meet them. He told Gerard that he wanted a word with him, and would be obliged if he and his mother could call at the Park that afternoon. Edith looked so entreatingly at them that after a little demur they promised. The truth was, the gipsies were again on Hoplands Common, and Gerard was anxious to visit them; but he did not tell Mr. Aspenel this, for fear of raking up an old grievance, and stirring up strife against Wandering Will and his allies. He and his mother were even more surprised than Edith at this attempt at renewed intimacy, though Gerard felt sure that there was some thought behind, connected with Loveridge probably, that induced it. Momentary happiness over-flooded Edith's sea of troubles, and her face brightened as she shook hands with her two dear friends. Her father perceived it, and took care to

tell her that what he wanted with Gerard was a mere matter of business. 'He will not like to transact it on Sunday,' thought Edith; but she did not venture to say so.

She went to afternoon service, and when it was over Mrs. Clarville and Gerard joined her and walked home with her, to the astonishment of the 'ladies,' who had been speculating on the estrangement. Mr. Aspenel met them and took possession of Gerard, carrying him off to his study when they reached the house; while Edith and his mother went to a charming room overlooking the lake, where tea was awaiting them.

'What has happened since I saw you?' asked Mrs. Clarville. 'You look so ill, that you must have had some trouble beyond the unexpected absence of Mrs. Aspenel. My dear child, can I advise you or help you?'

The kind words and manner brought

tears to Edith's eyes. She told Mrs. Clarville as much as she dared of what had occurred.

'She will write. She must come back. The nineteenth-century means of tracing people are so easy that no one would meditate flight under pretence of a visit. She is high-spirited and has taken French leave.'

Thus Mrs. Clarville tried to console Edith, while a very different sort of conversation went on between her son and Mr. Aspenel. It began with Loveridge, whom Gerard had seen the previous evening. He had traced him with some difficulty, for he had not chosen to meet him in Wharf Court. After some preliminary questions and answers, Gerard gave an account of his interview with him.

'I found him in a small but decent lodging not far from King William Street,' he began.

'Midway between my office and the

station,' interposed Mr. Aspenel. 'He has bad intentions.'

'I think not,' continued Gerard. 'He looked well, both in face and dress; more of a gentleman, even, than heretofore. He was in a sitting-room, and there were actually a few flowers on the table. Primroses, I remarked, and one or two violets. I noticed some books also—a copy of Shakespeare and the Bible amongst them. I did not venture to open them, but when I glanced at the latter he said, "Fruits of lectures in Wharf Court;" whether truthfully or satirically, I could not tell.'

'Satirically, take my word for that,' put in Aspenel.

'He asked how I found him out, and then I told him your proposal—or rather inquired what he would take to leave the country. He thought it over a few minutes, and finally said, three hundred a year.'

'Three—hundred—a—year!' repeated

Aspenel, as if each word were a death-groan. 'Impossible! Why, I am nearly ruined as it is.'

'I told him that you considered yourself so, and he laughed heartily. He has a very pleasant laugh, and is certainly handsome,' resumed Gerard, while Aspenel scowled ominously. 'He said that he would emigrate to Canada if he had a written promise from you, witnessed by me, of that sum, paid quarterly. He was so polite as to add that he would receive it at my hands, because he believed they were tolerably clean from contact with the baser metals.'

Gerard smiled, and Aspenel winced slightly, exclaiming,

'Impudent rascal! how dare he make terms with me? But I will think them over, and let you know my decision. Meanwhile will you keep an eye upon him and not lose his address?'

'I should be glad to be of service both

to him and you, sir; but I am not a detective.'

'You are the only person I can trust, and you *would* leave my service,' emphasising the 'would.'

The word 'service' grated upon Gerard, yet it had been service, and was still, for that much. Besides, he thought of Edith's white, anxious face, and determined to serve her father for her sake—and for Loveridge's. Indeed, he pitied Aspenel sincerely, for with all his wealth he was a miserable man.

'Had the man Loveridge a woman with him?' asked Aspenel, abruptly. 'His demands increase, which means woman.'

'I did not see one,' replied Gerard, who had himself improvised female taste at sight of the primroses.

'Woman!' repeated Aspenel, with set teeth. 'Man's curse and ruin. And you have tied yourself to an old woman who won't loosen you. Will you ask your

Lady Ascham to do something for me? She is a personal friend of Mrs. Aspenel's, and is acquainted with all the Whalley family. Will she, or you as her secretary, write to Lady Whalley and ascertain whether she has heard from Mrs. Aspenel?'

'That would be playing the spy indeed!' said Gerard.

'Not at all. You are the only man I can trust, and, as you will soon learn that Mrs. Aspenel has chosen to go off visiting on false pretences, I may as well confide in you. She has taken my son, Bruce, with her. I don't know where they are. I don't want to employ a lawyer to hunt them out, because of the scandal, to say nothing of the expense, which I can't afford, as you know who are aware of the claims upon me. I can't afford it.'

Aspenel paused, and stretched out his right arm, as if fighting an invisible foe. It pointed in the direction of the iron safe. Gerard answered, deliberately,

'I will submit your request to Lady Ascham. I know she has a great regard for Mrs. Aspenel, and have no doubt she will make any private inquiry as between friend and friend.'

'Just so. You are the only man I can trust.'

Gerard was pleasantly astonished by the discovery that he was considered so trustworthy by one who had snubbed him and almost insulted him frequently during his probation; but he was not unduly exalted, knowing his man, and that he could be uncommonly civil if he wanted to get anything out of a fellow-creature. Still, he pitied Aspenel, and, in his enthusiastic desire to bring other men to the footstool of the Most High, inwardly resolved to lead him there by such cords as Providence might hold out, were they cords of love or fear.

'Thank you for believing in me, Mr.

Aspenel,' he said. 'I will help you if I can, conscience approving.'

'And what's to pay? Stamps, paper, railway-fare, third-class of course—but you have a season-ticket; loss of time, only it's after hours. Let me know exactly what you demand.'

'Nothing.'

Gerard spoke this one word emphatically, and Aspenel instantly contrasted it with an account that lay before him. Tom Harton had brought it that morning, albeit it was Sunday. It contained the various items of his journey of the previous day, and the account of the full term for Bruce's schooling. He probably admired Harton's shrewdness more than Gerard's generosity; but he said nothing.

'My mother will be expecting me. Perhaps, if you have nothing more to explain, you will allow me to join her,' said Gerard, when he found that no argument followed his disclaimer.

Aspenel accompanied him, and they found Mrs. Clarville and Edith still in earnest discourse. Edith rang for fresh tea, and Mrs. Clarville chained Mr. Aspenel by producing a letter she had received from Janet. It was so amusing and descriptive that he forgot his grievances for the moment, and allowed himself to be beguiled into a discussion as to whether she should return home, or go to Paris for the summer vocation. It ended in the words, 'Paris, decidedly,' which reached Edith.

She and Gerard were rejoicing in a brief interval of happiness. She was at the tea-table; he on an ottoman, cup in hand. They talked of the singing-class and Sunday-school; they were shy as the most rustic of lovers; all was as commonplace as could be; but they were near one another once more, and they were happy.

Mr. Aspenel chanced to be standing, also tea-cup in hand, with his back to them,

Mrs. Clarville was reading him passages from Janet's letter; so he had to all appearance forgotten them. But with the 'Paris, decidedly,' he turned and faced them, and even he could discover nothing in the least lover-like between this 'trustworthy' clerk-secretary and his daughter, whom he knew to be equally trustworthy.

When Mrs. Clarville and her son left, Mr. Aspenel walked down the drive with them, and Edith watched them from the window. What a peaceful scene it was! Three people sauntering along beneath the spring foliage; the swans on the placid lake; the line of distant sea sparkling in the May sunshine. What could be more descriptive of 'The Sabbath of rest,' of which she chanced to have read that morning? Yet there was no real rest at Aspenel Park, though she believed that in Mrs. Clarville's humbler dwelling rest would abide. But she felt less lonely and depressed than she had done, because of this unexpected

renewal of intercourse with her friends; and when she sought her only earthly haven of repose, the old nursery, where her friend True still reigned, she looked brighter than she had looked for many days.

'You must put your trust in the Lord, my dear,' said that good woman. 'There is no one else who can help in troublous times. I have been holding a levée, as they call it, of all the servants, and, preach as I will, I can't quiet them. They're that obstinate in determining to give notice, that all I could say at last was, "Well, you're very unfeeling to Miss Aspenel," and this made them say they would bide a day or two, just to see if the mistress came back.'

But days crept on, and Mrs. Aspenel did not return, neither did she write. Edith exhausted all her resources in polite letters to her step-mother's relations, all worded with the utmost caution, but none of them

had seen her. Lady Ascham, at Gerard's request, also wrote to Lady Whalley, and received a letter in reply, intimating that she had as good as lost sight of Mrs. Aspenel for years, and was astonished to learn that a strange report was afloat of her being on a visit to her. She had imagined that the tide of wealth had swept away the lesser streams of friendship.

As may be imagined, all this exasperated Mr. Aspenel. Not that he showed exasperation, only increased gloom and moodiness. He set private inquiries on foot, employed detectives, and even consulted his lawyer; but of this not even Edith knew anything. What she knew was that his examination of domestic matters, and his irritating surveillance of his houshold, induced his servants to carry out their threat of giving notice, and one by one, either to him in extreme irritation or to Edith with expressions of regret, the threatened notice was duly served. All

but a kitchen-maid, her own maid, and Bruce's 'slavey,' as he called her, had resolved to depart.

'What am I to do, papa?' she asked, after a final parley with the cook-housekeeper. 'Mrs. Parsons has told me she will leave at the end of a month. All the indoor servants have given notice.'

'Let them go after their mistress,' replied Aspenel, with an addenda not to be quoted for ears polite.

Edith found that her courage always rose with the occasion, and circumstances were making a woman of her; so she said, with decision,

'But this establishment cannot be carried on without domestics, and you say new ones are not to be trusted. What am I to do?'

'Get charwomen in from the village. Tell the coachman and gardener they must help indoors; make that superannuated True of some use; ask Miss Lorne's old

Rebecca to come as cook; we don't want luxurious living just now, and shall keep no company until Mrs. Aspenel thinks proper to return. If this won't do, we'll shut up all the house except a living-room or two for you and me. Your nurse True can do for us, with the kitchen-maid, who has not yet given notice. One servant should suffice, and True has been idle long enough. Servants are an abomination.'

'True is not a servant,' spoke up Edith. 'She is a friend. She has had many opportunities of marrying, or otherwise improving her condition, but her promise to my mother never to leave me has kept her single and constant to us.'

Edith's voice quivered, and her father rose suddenly, with a 'Do what you like for her; but leave me in peace. I have enough on my mind without servant worries. Mrs. Aspenel must be back soon, for she will be penniless, and she is too shrewd to let her son be disinherited. She will

return when she has spent her money and her temper. Meanwhile you must help me to save; do you understand, Edith?—to save.'

He waited for no answer, but strode out of the room, leaving Edith aghast with the responsibilities suddenly thrust upon her.

CHAPTER XV.

JACK AND THE TIGRESS.

It was now Jack Harton's turn to frequent the gipsy-camp. Both openly and secretly he prosecuted his inquiries for Fan, and penetrated tent and van while making them. But he could gain no intelligence. Indeed, the gipsies themselves asked him as many questions as he asked them, for they remembered her many kind acts in previous years. There were no lollipops and bull's-eyes to lure the unwary children to school, and the parents, who were beginning to feel the advantages of education, had more trouble than enough with them ; and there were no pence forthcoming this year to pay

the fees; for, although Mr. Harton still tolerated them on his common, Fan's disappearance had hardened his heart against them. It was, in short, Fan's influence and Mr. Aspenel's hardness that had induced him to so much generosity the year before. He still loved to circumvent the squire, and prevailed on his faithful ally, Miss Vigors, to undertake Fan's gipsy Sunday-class, which she managed with such resolution and talent that she was almost as popular as Fan. Indeed, all the ladies, with Gerard their beloved at their head, became interested in the gipsies, and they bid fair to be as much spoilt as they had heretofore been neglected—for discretion is just as much the better part of charity, as of valour. Mr. Austen was always preaching this, but practising the contrary; for few appeals ever came amiss to him. Indeed, Roselands would have been a hot-bed of indiscretion but for Mr. Aspenel.

Summer had galloped, as the seasons are

wont to do, after spring, and, having overtaken her, had entirely displaced her, so that Whitsuntide had come in at *bride abattue*. Jack was astir very early on Whit Monday, having some hazy notion that Bank Holiday might help him to find Fan. Her dogs had taken to him just as if they understood what he had come home for, and followed him whenever and wherever he would let them.

'We will have a run on the common, and then return to breakfast,' he said, as he strode through the back-yard, up the copse, now in full leaf, and made for the encampment.

Its inmates were astir, preparing for their holiday, which meant work as well as play. The morning breezes swept the common, and disported amongst the golden lights and dreamy shadows that lay on its broad breast, while gorse and bracken waved, and harebells and grasses nodded, as they sported past them, and wandered

away towards the distant, rippling sea.

'There she is! there she is!' exclaimed Jack, following the breezes as hard as he could tear, the dogs at his heels.

But it was not Fan, only the Tigress. She was standing in the midst of the encampment, her grizzled hair floating to those obstreperous breezes, her old red cloak inflated by them, her lips apart as if to drink them in, and her arms outspread, Sybil like. Some of the tribe were gathered round her, and as Jack drew near he heard the words, 'The Lord bless and keep you all this day—in your goings out and your comings in—follow Him.' Jack only waited until the last word was spoken, then ran towards her, exclaiming:

'Where's Fan?'

She was taken by surprise. She did not recognise him, and looked slightly alarmed by his onslaught.

'Who are you? How should I know?' she muttered.

'Come with me and I'll tell you all about it,' cried excited Jack, seizing her by the arm.

She shook herself off and looked round as if for assistance.

''Tis Mr. Jack Harton,' whispered a by-stander.

'Then come with me,' she said, authoritatively, leading the way to an empty tent.

She entered, and Jack and the dogs followed. She squatted down on a bed at one end; Jack found a rough seat on a bundle of skewer-wood at the other; the dogs grouped themselves between them.

'I came here for a night's rest and quiet, and you won't let me alone,' she began, dreamily. 'I haven't slept for weeks, for a room and the smoke smother me; last night I slept from sundown to sunrise. But since I'm conwerted I must do God's work, both under brick and canvas. What do you want with me, Mr. Jack

Harton? Your father's son demands respect from Israelite, Egyptian, and Tartar.'

'I want Fan, Mrs. Lee, for I hear that's your real name. I'm come home from Canada on purpose to find her, and find her I will.'

'What do you want with Fan, sir? and what should I know of Fan? Since I'm conwerted I draw no horoscopes, consult no stars or palms, tell no fortunes. I've given up my living to serve the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for me—and I used to make pounds by telling the fortunes of fine ladies whose education ought to have taught them better than to employ me. Now I'm a hawker of good books, and try to conwert the ignorant, as Mr. Clarville, with the Lord's blessing, conwerted me. Have you passed through the fire of remorse, and the waters of penitence, and the sunshine of change of heart, and the starlight of peace?'

'I can't say that I have, Mrs. Lee, though I've seen a great many changes of climate out in Canada. But what has this to do with Fan?'

'What do you want with Fan, sir?'

'I want her for my wife, Mrs. Lee. I want to find her, and marry her, and take her back to Canada, where she'll be a sight freer and happier than in these dirty old tents. I beg your pardon, and I've no reason to abuse them, since I've been thankful enough for their shelter. But now I've got a house of my own—a log-house, to be sure, but just what Fan would like. If you know where she is, tell her I've come home on purpose to marry her, and make her mistress of a grand estate, full of trees and prairies, and all sorts of fine things, with our little house in the midst. Will you help me to find her, Mrs. Lee?'

'Shake hands, my dear lad, shake hands. You're like your father. You don't despise

people because they're not born and bred exactly like yourself.'

'Not a bit of it, my dear Mrs. Lee. If I did, I shouldn't have got on as well as I have. Bless your heart, we've men of all the colours of the rainbow and all the tribes of Israel, to say nothing of those Egyptians and Tartars you mentioned; and our parson is a converted Chippechouck Indian —conwerted, I should say—and preaches like an ancient Briton. If you'll come out and pay us a visit, I'll introduce you to him. He's a clergyman of the Church of England, if that's in his favour; and not a bad-looking man, I assure you. He's yellowish, but not a bit more so than many a bilious Englishman. Find me Fan, and come over and see us, and you and he together will conwert all Canada; and England, compared to Canada is about what this encampment is in comparison to Hoplands Common. What do you say, Mrs. Lee?'

Jack and the Tigress were hand in hand

during this speech. At every fresh sentence they shook afresh, for Mrs. Lee half pulled Jack from off the bundle of skewer-wood in her zeal.

'What do I say? Why, that if you're downright in earnest I'll see what I can do for you. I'll look about for Fan, and if I find her I'll let you know.'

'May I come with you? Why, Mrs. Lee, with your help I should find her as sure as I'm alive. Shall we set off at once?'

'That would spoil my search, Mr. Jack. She might turn up if I was alone. Besides, I'm just going to dress respectable, and hawk my books and tracks among the holiday-makers. I only put on my old red cloak for a treat while I'm trying to preach to my people. They listen better to one of themselves than to anybody else, except Mr. Clarville; and the cloak must 'a been born with me, and seems part o' me. But I put it off along with my heathenish ways

when I carry forth my basket. Tell me once more what you want to do with Fan?'

'I want to marry her, with my father's consent, and, if you see her, tell her so, and she'll come back to me. She'll be as grand a lady out in Canada as Miss Aspenel is at home, and it won't matter there whether she's fair or dark, a queen or a gipsy. Tell her I've worked like a cart-horse all for her. I emigrated for her sake, because out there people don't ask the number of your ancestors, but think more of the acres you have cleared. I shall be happy to receive any of her relations, and help 'em to an honest living.'

'As to family, sir,' said the Tigress, 'we can trace ours back to the Patriarch Abraham. Ishmaelites are we—wanderers all over the face of the earth; and I often compare our ancestress, Hagar, when in the wilderness, to myself roaming here and there for food and rest. I have found

mine in the Saviour of the world. No distinction of race, or clime, or station in His kingdom. Freedom for all. Life for all. Love for all.'

She got up in her excitement and went out of the tent. Jack followed, relieved, for her eyes flashed and her features worked in a way he failed to comprehend. The gipsies were variously engaged; some squatted round the big, iron pot, suspended from its primitive crook over the fire, eating and drinking; others preparing for wandering over the common, and elsewhere, in search of unwary excursionists; and the rest idling about, as if they meant to take a Bank Holiday. All made place for Mrs. Lee, who seated herself near the iron pot.

'Good-morning, sir,' she said, meaningly to Jack. 'Secrecy is our pass-word. Tell your father that we thank him for his hospitality.'

'You are welcome to share our meal in

return, sir,' said a stalwart man with a pipe in his mouth.

'Thank you. I should like it very much if my father wasn't waiting for me,' returned Jack, nodding to the Tigress and hurrying off with his dogs.

In spite of the watchword 'secrecy,' he told his father what had passed between him and Mrs. Lee. Instinctively he avoided making Tom also a confidant. Mr. Harton's comments were satisfactory, for he believed the Tigress knew all about Fan.

'You wouldn't object to my marrying her, father?' asked Jack.

'Find her first, and then we'll settle that matter,' replied Mr. Harton.

After breakfast Jack wandered forth again. He was too restless to stay indoors, and Fan must be found somehow. Again he went to the common, the encampment first. It was nearly deserted. Men, boys, donkeys, Mrs. Lee, and some of the women

had left; and only the van, an old horse or two, three women, the younger urchins, dogs and poultry remained. Hoplands Common was one of the many Bank Holiday resorts, but being some way from London was never crowded. Mr. Aspenel would have enclosed it if he could, but that was beyond his power. Jack forgot his private affairs in watching the people; only when he encountered happy lovers he wished for Fan. Parents with their children, elderly couples, schools, solitary men and women, vendors of cakes and sweets, passed and repassed him; and when he thought that every park, heath, common, wood, and lake, within reach of the capital, were visited by crowds that day, he rejoiced that the sun shone, and that there was balm and health on the breeze.

At the far end of the common he found the gipsies and their donkeys. They were driving a fine trade. For a penny a ride

the children mounted donkeys and merry-go-rounds, and gipsy men and boys attended to their own and their customers' interests.

'Where is Mrs. Lee?' he asked.

'Down by the station, a-selling her tracks,' replied a man with a wink, and his thumb pointed over his shoulder.

Jack hurried off to the station, and there, standing by the wayside, he saw a respectable-looking old woman, in black gown, checked apron, plaid shawl, and poked bonnet, with a large open basket before her. He did not recognise Mrs. Lee, but she it was.

'This book will suit you, sir,' she said, taking a pamphlet from her basket and offering it to him.

'I couldn't have believed it,' exclaimed Jack, taking sixpence from his pocket and giving it in return. 'I suppose this is what you mean by conwersion.'

'It is,' responded Mrs. Lee, solemnly, offering her wares to the passers-by.

'You will not forget,' he whispered. 'I can't rest till I find Fan.'

'Patience, young sir. Take a lesson from Mr. Clarville,' she replied; and he could get no more out of her.

But he went off in search of Gerard, whom he found hard at work in his mother's little garden. It was thus he strove to throw off the work and worry of an arduous life. The trio soon went into the house, and Jack introduced the one subject ever present to his mind—the discovery of Fan. Gerard said that, if Mrs. Lee had promised to help, there was a good chance of success, since if anyone knew anything about her, she did. But Gerard had his personal anxieties and worries as well as Jack. He was feeling the difficulty of serving two masters, or rather, a master and a mistress, for Lady Ascham was exigeante, and Mr. Aspenel

would not let him alone. His ready sympathy brought him more work than he bargained for, and from Roselands to the Close there was a constant strain upon it. At the former place everyone, from the rector to Miss Vigors, had something they wanted him to do; at the latter he was beset by applications for help. Jack was the last and most persistent claimant. The past two months had tried Gerard's patience more than any of his previous life; and he began to wonder whether a Mr. Aspenel or a Lady Ascham were the easier to serve. With the former he knew when his day was done, was it late or early; with the latter he was never secure from note or telegram. Then to have Jack filling up his spare minutes with the cry of 'I must find Fan,' and hunting him out of his retreat, was what Mrs. Pottle called 'the climebax.' However, this promise of help from Mrs. Lee brought him consolation as well as Jack, and when

that worthy departed he turned again to his digging and delving, until the next interruption occurred. This came in the astonishing announcement from the awe-struck Miranda, of ‘ Please, sir, here’s Mr. Aspenel.’

CHAPTER XVI.

A BANK HOLIDAY.

'THESE confounded Bank Holidays demoralise the world,' said Mr. Aspenel, as Gerard joined him in the little drawing-room. 'Nothing but play. Clerks, shopmen, servants, all alike. The Common swarming with these human pests who ought to be at work, while employers are ruined by the thousand.'

'It is a difficult question,' responded Gerard, who knew he was expected to say something.

'I came to you instead of asking you to come to me,' resumed Aspenel, 'because I thought we might be safe from listeners

and on-lookers. Since I have reduced my establishment, or it has reduced itself, I meet these village helps at every corner, their ears, I believe, at every door. Are we safe?'

He got up, and, opening the door, glanced down the staircase into the tiny hall. No sound met him, but he started, nevertheless, for Mrs. Clarville's big cat leaped past him into the room.

'My mother is out and the servant is busy in the kitchen. We are safe from eavesdroppers,' said Gerard.

Aspenel went close to him and began a whispered conversation.

'I have had another threatening letter, and I believe it is from Loveridge,' he said. 'You told him that I couldn't possibly agree to the three hundred a-year?'

'Yes, and he said he would not expatriate himself for less,' returned Gerard. 'I also told him that he was quite capable of managing his own affairs, and that I

wondered at his not transacting them in person.'

'You did!' shrieked Aspenel. 'Then that accounts for the letter. If you give up, my life isn't safe.'

'I have never before done any underhand work, sir; and I think you may trust this man if you deal fairly with him. He gives me to understand that there is a secret between you which places you in each other's power.'

'The fool! What right had he to say that?'

'It slipped out, but it is safe with me. I should be happy to be witness between you and him, if a meeting, understanding, reconciliation, could be effected.'

Aspenel's face grew dark, and he looked keenly at Gerard.

'Have you wormed yourself into his secrets, sir?' he asked, savagely.

'I know nothing of him, save that he is desirous to begin a new life either at home or abroad.'

'Do you believe him? Then you are less shrewd than I take you to be. See him once more, and tell him my ultimatum is two hundred a-year. If he won't take that, let him starve. Let him do his worst, and I'll do mine.'

'He says he would wish to meet you and make friends with you,' suggested Gerard, carefully. 'I know I have no right to interfere, but perhaps, if you saw him as he now is, you might overlook the past, whatever that may be. He owns to having wronged you, and would like forgiveness as well as money before he leaves the country for ever.'

'Wronged me! Was that all?'

'He intimated that he had also something to forgive. He is wonderfully changed since I first saw him in Wharf Court, both in manner, person, and mind.'

'Your preaching, I suppose?' sarcastically.

'No, I cannot take that unction to myself. He makes no profession of religion.'

'He is an ungrateful scoundrel, and I never wish to set eyes on him again as long as I live.'

Aspenel uttered his last sentence calmly, coldly, and deliberately. Then, as if attacked by a sudden fear, once more looked out into the passage. No one was to be seen, and a distant culinary chopping alone was heard. He did not re-seat himself, but changed the subject, standing for the moment as if to look out of the window.

'I suppose your mother and the other annuitants don't want money spent on their palace,' he said, hoarsely. 'If so, I am too poor to spend it. They may believe it now that they see how I have been compelled to reduce my establishment. Woman's work. Have nothing to do with the sex. How can you put up with Lady

Ascham? Has she heard anything of Mrs. Aspenel?'

'Nothing.'

'What does the world say?'

Gerard could not help laughing at this abrupt question, and thinking of the old game of 'Consequences,' which wound up up with 'What the world said about it.' He merely shook his head in intimation that he had not heard Mrs. Grundy's opinion, and Aspenel looked offended.

'I will try to see Loveridge to-morrow and bring him to a decision; after which, perhaps, I may be excused from further interference,' said Gerard, cautiously.

'I shall be glad to refund any money you may have disbursed on my account,' said Aspenel, more cautiously still.

'You used to say "Time is money," sir; and, although I cannot agree with you as regards myself, I do as regards Lady Ascham and her clients.'

'Ha, ha! her ladyship turns an honest

penny out of her charities. I always said nobody would undertake them for nothing. A percentage, I suppose?'

'Yes. She has found a wonderful investment, and looks upon me as her broker. That is why I mentioned Time as so necessary to manage all the affairs.'

'A wonderful investment? What? Where?'

Mr. Aspenel clutched Gerard's arm and gazed eagerly into his face. The young man, fearing to offend or annoy him, changed his tone, which had been that of slight banter, never understood by the elder.

'I spoke metaphorically, as Rowland Hill is said to have done. Lady Ascham has literally invested all she possesses where the securities are safe. I mean in the Treasury of the Kingdom of Heaven.'

'Cant! verbiage! hypocrisy!' muttered Aspenel, averting his face from Gerard's. 'Good-day. When you have seen Love-

ridge, come to my office; not to the Park —not to the Park.'

Gerard's face flushed, and an irritable reply rose to his lips, but he suppressed it.

'It must be my last interview, for, as I said, my time is now Lady Ascham's,' he returned, rather haughtily, and accompanied Aspenel to the door.

He watched him hurry through the enclosure, and thought of Edith. All his irritation vanished, and for the hundredth time he resolved to do what he could, honestly, for the father, for the sake of the daughter. Nearly two months had elapsed since he and his mother paid their last visit to the Park, on an occasion named in a former chapter. Rumour had been busy, and he knew that Edith must have a difficult part to play. Mrs. Aspenel and Bruce were still absent, and the general belief was that the wife had left the husband with no intention of returning. The servants had,

for the most part, resigned and departed; and the village-helps who supplied their place gossiped furiously. This was all that Gerard knew for a certainty, and this was enough. His mother sometimes met Nurse True, who was singularly reticent, and learned from her that Edith was well, and received good accounts of Janet, and that they would like to see Mrs. Clarville. But neither she nor Gerard chose to frequent the Park uninvited by its master.

A summons to tea put an end to Gerard's temporary sentiment, after which the customary walk with his mother, and domiciliary visits to friends, brought his luxurious Bank Holiday to a close. Mrs. Lucy was absent on a visit, and her rooms were placed at his service, so he had arranged to sleep there instead of at the rectory, which chanced to be unusually occupied by Mr. Austen's friends.

It was past ten o'clock, and he was wishing his mother good-night, when there

was a modest tap at the hall-door. Miranda had gone to bed, so Gerard answered it. He was confronted by the man Loveridge.

'May I have a word with you in private, sir?' he said, breathlessly. 'It will save your time and mine.'

Gerard bade him wait a few moments while he spoke to his mother. Mrs. Clarville was not a nervous woman, but such a visitor at such an hour terrified her. Gerard's acquaintance with him was known to her only in part, for he had not betrayed Mr. Aspenel's confidence, even to her. However, she proposed that while Gerard spoke to him she would warn Mrs. Lucy's little maid that he might be late. She accordingly waited in her bed-room while he brought Loveridge upstairs, then she slipped out and returned, but she did not attempt to retire to rest. She was only alarmed by the lateness of the hour, for she knew her son to be strong and brave.

'Neither you nor Mrs. Clarville need fear

me,' began Loveridge. 'But I had business in this neighbourhood, and being, as you know, one of the workers, I took my Bank Holiday with my fellow-toilers. I couldn't call on you in broad daylight because of our mutual friend, the autocrat of the Park; so I took the liberty of doing so at this hour, when "the owls do sing, tywhit tywhoo." I have been listening to the nightingales. What a concert they are giving us!'

Their marvellous song was indeed waking up the silent night as Loveridge spoke.

Gerard could not help smiling; but he asked his loquacious friend what his business was, as the nightingales reminded him of the hour.

'I am in a terrible fix. I want money,' he replied. 'I must have money if I am to maintain my *rôle* of respectability. You see, I took those gorgeous rooms on the understanding that our miser-millionaire would

come down with the needful. I mean, I located myself in them for certain reasons which you shall know as soon as our business is settled. I am ready to start for Canada on receiving the first instalment of my little annuity; but, while the respectable donor has been haggling over the amount, I have been eating my *blè en herbe*, as our light-hearted friends across the channel say. I have got myself up; I have "dwelt in marble halls;" I have begun a new life; and I have—spent all my money. I must have more. Aspenel wants to be rid of me; why doesn't he promise me that modest three hundred a-year—a grain of sand in his heaps of gold-dust?'

'He offers you two hundred. He will promise no more.'

'It won't do! I can't reform under three.'

'Then you are moved by mammon, not change of heart.'

'God forbid. One of us is sacrifice enough——'

Loveridge paused, and Gerard wondered what he meant. He argued with him, and persuaded him to accept the offered sum, which seemed to him handsome, saying that it was the amount of his own income. But the man remained firm.

'Circumstances have occurred which make an increase of my income absolutely necessary,' he persisted. 'Tell him that I cannot set up for a gentleman under three hundred a-year. I might take off a percentage for ready-money if he were not so enormously rich, but I can't sacrifice country, home, kindred, society, amusements, art, popular actors, and, above all, popular preachers, for nothing.'

He bowed to Gerard, put himself in an attitude, and burst out laughing. Gerard joined in spite of his efforts to be serious. What was there between this man and

Aspenel? What tie between the money-jobber and the spendthrift? What had Aspenel done to place him in the power of two men who seemed to haunt him like spectres? This latter thought recalled to his memory the struggle he had witnessed between him and Wandering Will, and he hazarded a question.

'Perhaps, while I am negotiating between you and Mr. Aspenel, you might help us here at Roselands. We are in search of a young girl supposed to be decoyed away by a gipsy-fellow known as Wandering Will. Have you ever seen or heard of him?'

'I seem to know the name. What is he like?'

Gerard described Wandering Will as minutely as he could, examining Loveridge's face the while. He fancied there was a smile at the corners of his mouth, but he could discover no symptom of consciousness of previous acquaintanceship.

'There are so many fellows answering your description,' he said, the smile broadening into a laugh, 'that it would be difficult to spot your man. But I will be on the look-out both for him and the young lady. What is she like?'

Gerard described Fan, adding that her friends would spare no money to discover her. Loveridge listened attentively, but instantly appeared to forget her in himself. He resumed the subject of money, asking how he was to live while Aspenel was making up his mind.

'I have not a *sou* to pay for a night's lodging. I could get one in the village if you would advance me a few shillings. You see it costs money to grow good all of a sudden, and my transformation is all but complete. A pound or so would finish me up. On the honour of a gentleman you shall have it back as soon as I receive my first quarter, and you will have the pleasure of testing my reformation.'

Gerard emptied his pocket of the few silver coins it contained, saying that he was heartily welcome to them. Loveridge grasped the hand that gave them, and declared that the donor's unselfish love for his fellow-men had done more to make a believer of him than all the sermons he had ever heard.

'And I have tried to listen to many in my time,' he added, with a laugh. 'But you and your mother will be glad to get rid of me. Good-night. Tell your squire that if he doesn't have a care I will do my worst. Fear will go farther with him than persuasion.'

He put the money into his pocket and hurried off. Gerard hastily wished his mother good-night, and followed his example.

He found Mrs. Lucy's little maid half asleep, and went to bed, wondering what his feelings would have been if she had

tumbled into the fire and set the Cottages ablaze.

He fell asleep himself with this idea in his mind, the warblings of the nightingales in his ears, and the stars in their courses looking in upon him. He drew up his blind that he might awake with the sun, and, as the sleeping apartments of the Cottages looked due east, there would be no difficulty on the present occasion.

He slept heavily for several hours, when he was aroused by what seemed a flood of sunlight. He thought he must have overslept himself, and quickly jumped out of bed. But the strange light bewildered him, as it flickered and wandered about the room. He looked out of the window towards the eastern sky. No sun appeared. He gazed round his restricted world, through the tall elms and stalwart oaks, up the avenue and parkland to the great house. A part of it was always

visible, as it stood on its eminence, to the gazer from the humbler Cottages. It was unusually visible at the moment, for from the roof issued jets of flame. Aspenel Park was on fire.

CHAPTER XVII.

FIRE AT THE PARK.

Gerard dressed as quickly as terror would let him, bewildered by thoughts of Loveridge, Aspenel, and, above all, Edith. He ran to his mother's cottage. She had also been aroused by the unusual stream of light, and had discovered its cause. She was in the act of opening the front door just as he was about to knock.

'Rouse up everyone and spread the alarm, while I go to the house,' he said. 'Send to the village and Hoplands. I will wake up Simmons at the lodge. Stir up all the ladies and let them help.'

Even as he spoke, they heard a distant

cry of 'Fire! Fire!' so it must have been discovered in the village. Mrs. Clarville was more self-possessed than Gerard, and, while he hurried away, proceeded to arouse her neighbours. He knocked up the people at the lodge, and bade the keeper go to the church and see after the fire-engine; but, while they were parleying, the church bell began to toll, and this warning of fire resounded far and near. But he was the first to reach the house. None of the inmates seemed to have been aroused, and the flames were spreading rapidly, somewhere at the back or side of the building. He knocked and rang frantically at the hall bell, and was rewarded by hearing a sash thrown up, and seeing a head thrust out, followed by a 'Who's there?' in Mr. Aspenel's voice.

'Fire! Fire! the house is on fire!' shouted Gerard.

His cry was echoed from within, and in another moment Aspenel opened the

hall door, shouting 'Where is it?' He had not stopped to put on any outer garment.

'On the west side or at the back,' cried Gerard, darting past him, and running up the staircase to the corridor, where he knew Edith's apartments were.

He knocked at every door until he was answered by Nurse True. He saw the flames through the window at the end of the corridor. Shouts were arising on all sides, so he knew that everyone was awakened, and there could be no danger of loss of life, if only people chose to save themselves.

'For God's sake come out! Tell Miss Aspenel to come at once. The fire is spreading, and it is on this side. There is not a moment to lose,' he cried, as Nurse True appeared in some costume improvised at the moment.

Crash went the window at the end of the corridor, and in leaped the flames.

'What is the matter?' asked a gentle voice, and Edith came from her room, her fair hair falling over a loose dressing-gown.

The flame seemed to pursue her up the passage, and Gerard caught her in his arms, bidding Nurse True follow.

'My father—where is my father?' asked the astonished girl.

'I have just seen him. He is safe,' replied Gerard, while Edith's maid, the sole other occupant of the corridor, appeared, aroused by Nurse True. She had a birdcage in her hand.

'I cannot leave the house, Cousin Gerard,' said Edith, struggling to free herself from his hold.

'You must,' returned Gerard, running down the long wide passage to the head of the stairs, followed by the half-clad, terrified women, and pursued by the tongues of flame that threatened to lick them all into the jaws of the fire.

'I will see to them, lovey. Save her, Mr. Gerard, for God's sake,' cried Nurse True, pausing at the foot of the stairs, where no flames had, as yet, penetrated.

'And I have your bullfinch, Miss,' said the maid, keeping close to Gerard's heels.

Heedless of Edith's resistance and her cries for her father, scarcely hearing the confused noise of voices and the outcry at the back of the house, passing by the breathless people who came to help, with a shout of 'In the west wing,' he bore his precious burden across the hay to the lodge, by which he had entered. It was empty now; the big gates were thrown open, and the villagers were making their way to the house, carrying buckets, pitchers, or such water-vessels as they first laid hold of. The dawn was breaking, and, when they fancied they recognised Edith, they blessed him for saving her, and added, 'Make haste back, Mr. Gerard;

make haste back.' Had he saved her? he asked himself, for after her vain struggles she lay passive in his arms. She had fainted.

In another minute she was with his mother, her terrified maid by her side; but no Nurse True. The neighbours were there also, and Gerard knew that he left her with those who loved her. He laid her on the sofa without a word, and literally raced back again to the scene of the fire. As he ran up the drive he saw that the heavens were aglow, and the dawn was put out by the ever-increasing flames. The birds were awakened before their time, and were dashing into a half-frightened, half-jubilant chorus; the cocks were uttering their shrill clarion-call far and near, as if aroused to unexpected warfare; and the cattle were calling to one another in unusual amazement. The Hoplands' dogs and horses barked and neighed as if rivalling one another, while their master,

his sons, and servants were working like slaves.

Gerard encountered Jack.

'We can't find Aspenel,' he cried, breathlessly.

'He must be safe. I saw him with my own eyes,' said Gerard. 'He let me in. Perhaps he went to his study.'

'God forbid. The fire broke out there —is raging there,' shrieked Jack.

'Come and see,' shouted Gerard, leading the way into the hall, still intact, and thence to the passage which led to Aspenel's den. Here they were arrested by a door, locked or bolted, apparently, from within. They tried to force it open.

'Break it down. Push. Save us. We shall be burnt to death,' sounded from within, in a voice of agony. 'It is blocked, and I cannot move.'

It was simply a baize door, and when the two young men put their backs to it, and pushed with all their force, the hinges

gave way, and it fell inward. There was still an obstacle, but the voice, which Gerard fancied he recognised as Loveridge's, said,

'Just missed us. Here we are, dead or alive.'

They stooped and saw what seemed to them two corpses; only they knew that dead men do not speak. To Gerard's horror and amazement they were Aspenel, tightly clasped in the arms of his enemy Loveridge. Both were cruelly burnt, but whether Aspenel lived or not it was impossible to say. One of his hands clutched Loveridge's arm, the other a handful of gold.

'He would not be saved. Lust is stronger than death. Bring something to ease this awful burning,' cried Loveridge.

They dragged them into the hall, and shouted for help. We spare the reader a description of the sight—horrors are not in our line; but Gerard was sure that

Aspenel's lips moved. They brought buckets of water from the flaming wing and dashed over them. It was useless. The doctor of the Union was on the spot, and came. Mr. Austen also appeared, and others of the terrified helpers, all pale and awe-struck.

'Take them to the rectory,' said Mr. Austen.

'Hoplands is much nearer. The flames are gaining ground. We are not safe here. Put them on the baize door and carry them to Hoplands,' shouted Jack, who was, perhaps, the most strong-minded of the party, having already seen fires, and fires.

At this moment Nurse True came on the scene, armed with sheets of cotton-wool, oil, and other appliances. She had managed to see that all the household was saved, thanking God that it was so small: and also to get dressed.

'Is my darling safe?' she asked of Ger-

ard; and, being satisfied, accompanied the stretcher which held the two injured men to Hoplands.

They had succeeded in loosening the miser's grip of Loveridge, and in laying them side by side.

'I shall see you again,' said Loveridge to Gerard. 'Our negotiations are brought to a strange end. God's will is stronger than man's.'

'Only say you had nothing to do with this,' whispered Gerard, stooping over him.

'Nothing, on my honour as a gentleman,' replied Loveridge.

Gerard had no time to question either this strange man or his own preconceived opinion of him. At first he believed that he had followed his threat by setting fire to the Park; but, if so, he could scarcely have run the risk of losing his own life by going right into the flames; unless, indeed, it

were in search of gold. He turned from the melancholy procession to go round to the place where the fire was raging, where engines were plying, and men mounting ladders, and spectators shouting, and wood and masonry falling, as is usual on such fearful occasions.

'Master must have set the place on fire himself,' said the coachman. 'I saw a light in his study as late as twelve o'clock. I was up with one of the horses.'

'They are safe?' asked Gerard. 'Miss Aspenel's mare, that she is so fond of?'

'They're all right, sir. 'Tis a judgment on the squire, for his goings-on.'

These opinions circulated among the horror-stricken people, who yet had no time for calculations, since everyone worked with a will to stay the course of the flames. The Hartons, father and sons, were amongst the foremost, and, thanks to their exertions and forethought, engines arrived from the

county town, with firemen better used to their work than were the villagers or the two policemen.

Gerard was soon mounting a ladder and aiding as much as he could. He ascertained that the fire had originated in the west wing: whether in Mr. Aspenel's study or not was uncertain; but as it was situated below the corridors whence he had rescued Edith, and where the flames had done their worst, he fancied it had begun thereabouts. Incendiarism was suggested by some who knew how unpopular Aspenel was; but there was little time for speculation, seeing that minds and bodies were bent on at least saving part of the grand old house. So long as the frontage remained intact, people dragged forth pictures, furniture, ornaments, and whatever they could lay their hands on, all of which strewed the park and drive; but the corridors containing Mrs. Aspenel's particular rooms, and those appropriated to the young

people, were soon gutted. Measures were taken to keep the flames at bay by means of the engines, and they were not quite unsuccessful; still, all save the front portion of Aspenel Park was a ruin.

Before the fire was got under, crowds came from far and near; for the flames were visible at a great distance, the house standing on an eminence. It was now that the bystanders began to gossip, and round about his falling mansion to talk of the owner and his ways. If they did so with bated breath, it was because he was reported as burnt to death, and they had a superstitious awe at so fearful a calamity. There was no personal regret for the man, only horror at his end. The gipsies were there from the common, but the policemen sent them off by the assurance that if they did not have a care they would be had up for setting the place on fire; so they returned to the safety of their tents, and watched from a distance. If they were

guilty of unholy loot, it was known only to themselves. The destruction of property was great enough to satisfy the most determined enemy; but, when real affliction arrives, enemies become friends.

Old Harton exemplified this. He forgot rheumatism and personal animosity together, and worked till, as he afterwards said, all aches, mental and bodily, oozed out at every pore.

'I wish I had shaken hands with him. I was too stiff-necked,' he said to Gerard.

'You may yet have the opportunity. I am sure he was not dead,' returned Gerard, with a shudder.

'Spared to repent. I pray God he may be spared to repent,' said Mr. Austen, who was near.

Men, women, and children forgot themselves—forgot their work—forgot their breakfast; and we all know that it is only some special emergency which makes one oblivious of the cravings of hunger. It

was between nine and ten o'clock when down came a torrent of rain. This was more effectual than the engines, and finally extinguished the fire. Haymakers suddenly remembered their hay waiting to be carried; others their clothes about to be soaked, their meals ready to be eaten.

'God is good!' they exclaimed. 'He is stronger than the engines. But the fine furniture will be spoilt, and what will Madam Aspenel do when she comes home?' 'She'll never come back again, take my word for it. But Miss Edith, and Miss Janet, and the boy. What's to become of them?'

As the flames subsided, the people scuttled off to their homes, leaving comparatively few behind to help and encourage the firemen, who, as they always do, had shown heroic courage and self-abnegation.

The Hartons, Mr. Austen, and Gerard

were among those who remained; that is to say, Tom Harton and his father, for Jack did not return.

'Where is Miss Aspenel?' asked Harton, senior.

'With my mother at the Cottages,' replied Gerard.

'How did she get there?' asked Tom.

'I took her,' returned Gerard; and Tom frowned.

Was there ever a calamity whence jealousy is excluded?

Edith, meanwhile, lay shivering in Mrs. Clarville's bed, watched tenderly by that kind lady. It will be remembered that Gerard left her in a fainting-fit in his mother's care. When she revived, she declared her intention of returning to the scene of the fire in search of her father; but her slight, delicate frame forbade. She could not stand, and the kind friends who surrounded her carried her from sofa to

bed, almost as if she were an infant. This was the culminating point of all her troublous anxiety, and she burst into passionate weeping. Mrs. Clarville drew the curtains and darkened the room, to exclude as much as possible the reflection of the flames, but her cry was for her father and True.

'I will go and see after them,' volunteered Miss Vigors to Mrs. Clarville. 'Mr. Gerard said her father was safe, but did not name that infinitely more estimable person Mrs. Trueman.'

Miss Vigors took Mrs. Clarville's large gardening-hat from off its peg in the hall, and started, while Miranda stood shivering and shaking at the door, watching the flames.

'Shall we be burned, miss—shall we?' she asked; but Miss Vigors did not condescend to answer. 'She do look funny; that she do,' apostrophised the girl, watching the round, active figure at the gates.

But Miranda was ordered to light the

fire, boil the kettle, make tea for Edith, and otherwise occupy herself during Miss Vigors' absence; so when that lady returned she did not see her horror-stricken face, or discover that the strong-minded woman had grown weak of a sudden. Mrs. Clarville stole out of Edith's room.

'What is the matter? What has happened?' she asked, her own face almost reflecting her friend's.

'Tell her that her father and Nurse True are at Hoplands. I saw them going there. Oh! a fire is an awful sight. I was never so near one before,' was all the answer Miss Vigors gave.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CONSULTATION OF DOCTORS.

As we have already seen, Miss Vigors was a woman of action. No sooner had she sent her message to Edith than she marched off again to Hoplands. She wished to be of use to her friend, Mr. Harton, and she said so. She arrived just as Jack was giving orders to the bewildered maids, who had just hastened home from the fire. The stretcher with its terrible burden had been carried upstairs, and the burnt and suffering Loveridge had been laid on Jack's bed, while the insensible if not absolutely dead Aspenel was placed on that in the spare room. Nurse True was with the latter;

Miss Vigors assumed for the moment the superintendence of the former. The doctor had as much as he could do between them. Jack was beside himself, and, having been the agent in thus burdening his father, knew not what to do with those he had helped to rescue. But Mr. Harton and Gerard soon came, and the former took the matter into his own hands.

'We must telegraph for other medical men,' he said. 'The responsibility is awful.'

'I will telegraph,' said Gerard. 'I must send a telegram to Lady Ascham as I cannot possibly go to-day. I will just see the doctor first.'

He strode upstairs and met Dr. Richards, who told him that Mr. Aspenel was alive, but happily unconscious, and that Loveridge, although frightfully burnt, was, he hoped, not mortally injured. He forbade his seeing either patient, and Gerard, hearing Loveridge's fearful groans, was thank-

ful for the prohibition. He hastened off to the station, promising to return later on; and sent telegrams to Lady Ascham and two celebrated surgeons, one in London, the other in the county town. Then he went, where his heart already was, to inquire for Edith.

Miranda met him open-mouthed, with the news that she was as bad as could be, while Miss Lilyton tripped downstairs with the announcement that she slept. Which was he to believe? His mother did not appear, for she was watching silently by Edith. He swallowed a cup of tea at Miss Lilyton's request, for he was quite exhausted, then asked Miranda to turn out a suit of clothes which was kept in a cupboard in the hall for an exigency, took them to Mrs. Lucy's, and changed his soaked garments for dry ones. This done, he returned to the scene of the fire.

The rain had ceased, and so, virtually, had the fire, which had raged for five or

six hours. As yet the cause had not been discovered, but the house was all but a ruin. The façade, and therewith the principal front rooms, was not much injured, but the back and sides were roofless and gutted. Such furniture as had been saved was drenched, and the sound of falling beams and rafters and the occasional cracking of smouldering embers, completed the desolation. No lives were lost; no accident had happened to anyone save the owner and his rescuer.

Gerard stood surveying the melancholy scene. The sun suddenly reappeared and shone through the trees, turning each dripping leaf into gold; a thrush instantly began a long-drawn warble, which was taken up by its neighbours, and soon Nature triumphed again over the aroused and angry elements.

'Are they dead?' were words that startled Gerard from his reverie.

They were spoken by Tom Harton.

He told him all he knew, and they went together to make inquiries elsewhere. All sorts of reports were already spreading, and Tom Harton was inclined to believe that it was the work of an incendiary, though he allowed that it would have been impossible for a stranger to penetrate into Aspenel's room.

'I have seen the locks and bars, and watched his vigilant eyes,' he said, 'and nobody could have entered from without. If those two charred individuals are to be kept at Hoplands, I shall depart from it.'

There was nothing more to be done, so the young men walked together to the lodge, and separated. Gerard was now met by his mother, who told him that she feared Edith was really ill, and that he had better ask Dr. Richards to call and see her. She was hysterical, and inquiring incessantly for her father. Gerard suggested that they should await the arrival of the

medical men, one of whom had attended at the Park, and they set Miranda to watch for the first cab from the station to Hoplands. But Gerard could not rest, and wandered forth himself in quest of he scarcely knew what.

The doctors did not arrive till late in the afternoon, and he speedily followed them to Mr. Harton's. He was received by Jack, who made short work of the medical portion of the history.

'They are swathed in cotton-wool, and oiled all over. You can't see an inch of 'em. Only their eyes and mouths are visible, like the Laplanders. They look awful. I bought up all the wadding and oil in Roselands, and Richards hadn't enough. That old True's a brick. She sticks to her master just as if she loved him, and he only just alive. The other does nothing but ask for you when he's sensible; but you should see Miss Vigors! She manages him like a baby. She wouldn't make

a bad sort of a step-mother after all.'

'My dear Jack, how can you jest at such a time?' cried Gerard, whose imagination carried him to the scene upstairs.

'No good to cry. Nobody enjoys a joke like Fan. I wish she were here, if it was only to console father. He's awfully concerned.'

Mr. Harton joined them, and declared himself delighted to see Gerard, who 'had more sense and feeling than all the rest put together.'

'But,' he added, with a chuckle, 'you've ruined your prospects by sending for two doctors. If Aspenel pulls through, he'll never forgive your extravagance. Who on earth is the man who rescued him at the risk of his own life?—if rescue it may be called.'

'His name is Loveridge. I have seen him before,' returned Gerard.

When the consultation of medical men was over, and they came downstairs, they

had not much to say. As usually happens in such cases, they said that all had been done that could be done; that Loveridge would probably recover, as all his burns were superficial, but it was impossible to decide in the case of Aspenel. They feared the fire had reached some vital part; but he was conscious, and would possibly regain the speech, paralysed by terror. The hand and arm that clutched the gold were fearfully excoriated, &c., &c. In short, no verdict could be much worse.

'I am afraid you must wait for your fee, gentlemen, but you will take some refreshment,' said Mr. Harton, leading the way to the dining-room.

Gerard was called away to Nurse True, who met him on the landing.

'Tell my darling that I will not leave her father, God granting me strength to nurse him,' she said. 'She must on no account come to him yet. It would kill

her, and do no good. Mrs. Clarville will be a mother to her, I know. Some one must write to Miss Janet in Paris ; but she is best away. My love to my darling. Take care of her, Mr. Gerard.'

'I will,' said Gerard, emphatically.

Fortunately True had not time to inquire into Edith's state, or she would have felt her task more difficult than it was. She was summoned back to the sick-room by Dr. Richards, who overwhelmed her with directions ; while Jack came to tell Gerard that his father insisted on his eating and drinking. This gave him the opportunity of requesting one of the medical men to call and see Edith. At the same time he inquired if it would be safe for him to visit Loveridge, who asked to see him.

'Better wait till to-morrow,' said Dr. Sant.

'I shall not be here to-morrow,' returned Gerard.

Dr. Sant went again to Loveridge before he left Hoplands, and told Gerard that he might visit him for a short time that evening.

'Keep him as quiet as you can; but in his case the excitement of expectation is almost worse than that of saying what he wants to say,' he remarked.

Then Gerard spoke of Edith, and related her rescue and subsequent hysteria, and he—Dr. Sant—consented to delay his departure in order to see her. The other physician hurried off to catch the train.

Event succeeded event so rapidly that Gerard scarcely knew how either to follow or accompany them. However, he walked with the doctor to the Cottages, promising Mr. Harton and Jack to return as soon as possible; but somehow everybody wanted Gerard.

Mrs. Clarville took Dr. Sant at once to Edith. She was quite composed, and declared herself well enough to go to her

father. With the prescience of skill, he combated her wish quietly.

'You will be of more use eventually if you leave him to his excellent nurse, and recover your own energy first,' he said; 'sudden shocks prostrate more than illness, and you must get over yours.'

'Will he recover?' asked Edith.

'Life is in God's hands, my dear young lady,' he replied, evasively. 'We must be thankful that he escaped.'

'I am, I am. But he has now no one but me.'

This idea had taken possession of Edith, and late events at the Park had tended to convince her that she was necessary to her father. But Dr. Sant argued,

'In the present emergency, the excellent woman whom I remember at the Park in your own mother's time, and who was your nurse, is a more effectual help than you could be. You must remain here for the present.'

'I am putting dear Mrs. Clarville to inconvenience—turning her out of her room —giving trouble to everyone. Isn't it strange that we should be homeless, and my father so rich, so rich! Ah! I see the flames! Where is Gerard? Cousin Gerard, save my father!'

Dr. Sant soon discovered that Edith was not only hysterical but slightly delirious. She put her hands before her eyes as if to shut out the fire, and sobbed quietly.

He beckoned Mrs. Clarville from the room, and she, being replaced by Miss Lilyton, told him that she feared that Edith had had too much on her mind since the sudden departure of Mrs. Aspenel. She recapitulated all she knew of Mr. Aspenel's proceedings during the past months, and Dr. Sant, who was well acquainted with him and his penurious ways, was not slow to perceive that the fire was the consummation of the delicate

girl's troubles. Dr. Richards arrived while this was passing, and the two medical men held a long and anxious consultation on their three patients in the drawing-room, Mrs. Clarville returning to Edith. They found all sorts of cordials and restoratives in the small apartment, turned into a surgery and general store-room by the good ladies of the Homes. They and their maids had emptied their boxes for linen, and the Roselands shops for ætherous medicines, in order to aid Mrs. Clarville; and even Miss Short had stumped into her hall to offer to put up Edith's maid, who was more hysterical than her mistress, as maids not unfrequently are.

The neighbours, high and low, had swarmed about the tiny abode, and Miranda had never been so important, or enjoyed herself so much, since she had been in Mrs. Clarville's service. It quite reminded her of London, she said.

Gerard walked to the station with Dr. Sant. He was anxious to have his real opinion of his patients, and especially to learn something of his beloved Edith. Since he had held her in his arms that morning, and perhaps saved her life, he had been in a tumult of varied feelings. Would she be shy of him, and annoyed with him for forcibly carrying her away from her father, and taking her to his mother? She had called him by the old familiar name, caught from Janet, of Cousin Gerard, and that comforted him; still he dreaded her awakening to the recollection of his flight across the park. Dr. Sant reassured him as to her bodily state, and said her mental organisation was so delicate that the greatest care was necessary to avert brain-fever. He asked Gerard to call on him, if possible, on the morrow, and report the effect of his interview with Loveridge. He said the man showed a marvellous courage and endur-

ance, and he wanted to know more of him. But Gerard gave him a short sketch of what was expected of him by Lady Ascham, which made the doctor laugh heartily, and say that he might be a medical man, since he seemed to be at everybody's beck and call.

This was not far from the truth, for no sooner was he at home again, and seated in the hall, enjoying a cup of tea with his admirer, Miss Lilyton, than Jack arrived, breathless, declaring that 'there was no quieting that fellow Loveridge ever since the doctor had promised him a visit from Gerard.' So Gerard gulped down his tea too hot, while Miss Lilyton remonstrated, and Jack entreated him not to scald himself to death, since one pair of scorched fellow-creatures was enough at a time.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

LONDON: PRINTED BY DUNCAN MACDONALD, BLENHEIM HOUSE.

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